The Subjective and the Objective: The Philosophy of Thomas Nagel

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Abstract

Throughout the past two decades, Thomas Nagel has advanced a highly original view of philosophy. Though hundreds of articles and reviews have been published on him, they are inadequate in at least two aspects. Firstly, there is not any comprehensive discussion on his philosophy as a whole. As a result, not many people, as far as I know, can really appreciate the unique and important contribution of Nagel and defend his project. Besides, Nagel himself has never clarified and justified the concepts of *intuition*, *reality*, and *the distinction between the subjective and the objective*, which together form the foundation of his philosophy. Therefore, I think it is now the time to make a detailed study of Nagel's philosophy and assess his real contribution.

In this essay, I want to argue that ① Nagel's unique contribution lies in his effort in giving a new sense to philosophy through reformulating traditional philosophical problems in a way that captures their essence and showing that they are all grounded on certain fundamental facts of human beings. ② Nagel's general account of the common source of philosophical problems, instead of being dogmatic, is well grounded. The task is to be accomplished by a careful examination of his three central concepts. In Chapter 1, I will discuss the meaning and the status of "intuition" in Nagel's philosophy. I will argue that though Nagel does rely his project heavily on our intuition, he is by no means dogmatic and irrational in his trust of it. Then, I will examine Nagel's conception of viewpoint. I will explicate what a viewpoint in general, and subjective and objective viewpoint in particular, are. In Chapter 3, I will investigate Nagel's conception of reality. I will explain what he means by and how he establishes from our intuitions the subjective and the objective reality. Then, I will explore and justify his original claim that all philosophical problems are essentially the results of the conflict between our subjective and objective viewpoints in Chapter 4. Finally, I will conclude by discussing what Nagel thinks to be the ultimate mystery of all reflective beings.

論文摘要

在過去二十年來，托馬斯・內格爾提出了一個極具原創性的哲學觀。雖然現在已有數以百計的文章及書評論及內格爾，但它們至少在兩方面來說是不足的。首先，就我所知，現時並沒有任何關於他的哲學的全面性討論。結果，並沒有太多人能夠真正地欣賞他獨特而重要的貢獻以及為他的理論辯護。其次，內格爾本人從來沒有對其理論的基本概念-直覺、實在和主/客觀的區分-加以澄清和証明。因此，我認為現在正是對他的哲學進行詳細研究，以及對其貢獻作出恰當評估的適當時刻。

在本文中，我希望能夠論証 ① 內格爾的貢獻，在於他通過以一種能夠捕捉傳統哲學問題本質的方式把它們重構，從而賦予哲學一個新的意義，並且証明它們全都是根植於人類的某些基本事實；② 內格爾對哲學問題共同根源的一般解釋是有充分理據而非盲目獨斷的。我將會透過審查他的三個中心概念來証明上述兩點。在第一章中，我將會討論直覺在內格爾哲學中的意義和地位。我會論証雖然他的整個計劃非常依賴於直覺，但他並非獨斷或非理性。第二章討論他對於觀點的看法。我會闡明對他來說何謂主觀和客觀的觀點。第三章探討他關於實在的看法，並解釋他如何在直覺的基礎上建立主觀和客觀實在。然後我會在第四章解釋和証立他認為所有哲學問題本質上都是源於我們主觀和客觀觀點之間的衝突的主張。最後我會以內格爾對所有反思性存有的終極之謎的討論作結。

THE FOUNDATION OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF THOMAS NAGEL

REFERENCES GIVEN IN ABBREVIATED FORM

POA *The Possibility of Altruism*, Oxford University Press, 1970; rpt. Princeton University Press, 1978.

MQ *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge University Press, 1979.

VFN *The View from Nowhere*, Oxford University Press, 1986.

Mean *What Does It All Mean? A Very Short Introduction to Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, 1987.

E&P *Equality and Partiality*, Oxford University Press, 1991.

OM *Other Minds: Critical Essays 1969-1994*, Oxford University Press, 1995.

LW *The Last Word*, Oxford University Press, 1997.

INTRODUCTION

0.1 Why Study Thomas Nagel?

It has been 11 years since the first publication of Thomas Nagel's generally praised book *The View From Nowhere* in 1986[1] (and 18 years since *Mortal Questions*[2], which is the prelude to the former). Though hundreds of articles and reviews have been published on the thought of Nagel, they are, in my opinion, inadequate in at least two aspects. Firstly, most of these articles only focus on one particular aspect of Nagel's thought, especially his philosophy of mind. Few of them make comprehensive discussion on his philosophy as a whole. There are indeed commentators[3] who can spell out and evaluate the originality of Nagel's way of bringing various seemingly disparate philosophical problems under the general structure of the conflict between the subjective and the objective points of view. None of them, however, really succeed in, or are even aware of the need of, on the one hand, appreciating the unique and important contribution Nagel has made to philosophy, and hence, on the other, defending the validity of his project.

By that, I do not mean that they neglect Nagel's wit in projecting a general structure to accommodate all philosophical problems. Nagel has surely done this. But is it *all* that he has done? Does he merely provide us with a new conceptual framework in viewing how philosophical problems *can be* linked together? If it is so, it is difficult to see what unique and significant contribution he has made to philosophy, if any. What is the point of producing

[1] Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, Oxford University Press, 1986.
[2] Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge University, 1979.
[3] Most of them are short book reviews on *The View From Nowhere*, e.g. Edward F. Mooney, Christopher Peacocke, Colin Mcginn, and A.W. Moore.

one more framework among the others? Why should we choose his framework rather than others? Most importantly, why do we need such a general description if the enterprise of philosophy itself is worthless, as contemporary pragmatists claim? It is not surprising that while there are numerous articles and reviews on Nagel's particular ideas, there is, as far as I know, not even one single book published on his philosophy. In other words, Nagel, I think, is underestimated and his real contribution does not receive the appreciation it deserves.

Besides, there is a very important thing which Nagel himself has never done. There are three basic concepts that form the foundation of his philosophy: *intuition*, *reality*, and *the distinction between the subjective and the objective*. What seems to me to be inadequate is his lack of direct and explicit clarification and justification of them. And it is, I think, the very obstacle that hinders our proper understanding, and hence appreciation of Nagel.

For example, Nagel is regarded by some as a dogmatist in his adherence to intuition. Nagel gives us the impression that he always appeals to our intuition and grounds his objections to other's claims on their being *counter-intuitive*, "*incredible*" or "*impossible to believe*". It seems that his opponent may legitimately challenge him by either rejecting Nagel's reliance on intuition or claiming that he upholds a different set of intuitions.

On the other hand, many commentators have pointed out that Nagel's distinction of the subjective and the objective are far from being clear, and even ambiguous. Such ambiguity leads to the confusion between the epistemic and the ontological subjectivity/objectivity. That is, they charge Nagel to have slid from "the subjective conception of reality" to "subjective reality". If the charge is justified, Nagel's philosophy of mind — anti-physicalist and anti-reductionist —and hence his ontology will be severely undermined.

Since *Subjective and Objective*[4] and *The View From Nowhere*, Nagel himself has never attempted to clarify his use of the concepts or defend

[4] *MQ*, chap 14, p.196-213.

against these charges. Consequently, while those who buy Nagel's ideas do not even attempt to defend his project, those who do not simply ignore his writings. Though I can understand that Nagel wants to avoid the "burden"[5], I don't think it is a satisfactory way of response. Since the concepts of intuition, reality and the subjective/objective distinction are fundamental to his whole enterprise of reformulating philosophy, I consider his inaction highly unsatisfactory. And I think once these concepts are clarified, those charges can be refuted.

Because of all the inadequacies mentioned above, I think it is now the time to make an in-depth study of Nagel's philosophy and assess his real contribution.

0.2 The Contribution of Thomas Nagel

Though we cannot really appreciate Nagel's contribution before we go into detailed discussion of his philosophy, it is helpful to have a preliminary idea of what he has achieved. In my opinion, Nagel has done, throughout his philosophical career, much more than just giving new insight to particular areas of philosophical discussion and laying out the general structure of various philosophical problems. His unique contribution lies in his effort in ***GIVING A NEW SENSE TO PHILOSOPHY through reformulating traditional philosophical problems in a way that captures their essence and showing that they are all grounded on certain fundamental facts of human beings.***

If Nagel is successful, it is a real contribution. It is because philosophy *per se* is undergoing a crisis of legitimization. Some contemporary

[5] "While I admire those, like Dworkin and Searle, who have the stomach and the talent for this sort of polemic, I have lost what appetite I ever had for it, and hope instead that the current wave of confusion will subside if we just ignore it. I think it is a great burden for a field of theoretical inquiry if its practitioners have to compete for the approval of those who don't understand the issues", in Thomas Nagel, *Other Minds*, Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 9.

philosophers declare the "death" of traditional philosophy. The whole discipline — not only the answers it gives but also the very questions it asks — simply does not make any sense. In other word, we just don't see the point of —and hence or otherwise, do not care, what the philosophers are doing. Some philosophers even try to show that a) investigation in traditional philosophical problems yields no fruitful result; b) all these problems are dissolved as unreal; and thus c) it is pointless to continue to waste our time (and money). The study of philosophy can be of cultural and historical interest, i.e. it may help us a lot in understanding the details of a particular culture in a certain historical epoch. There is, however, no need to ask those philosophical questions any more. As a result, it seems necessary that philosophers, if they deny that their effort is meaningless, must in one way or other legitimize what they are doing. It involves at least the justification of the significance of the philosophical problems in the face of the fact that most, if not all, of them remain unsolved despite the unceasing effort of the most brilliant minds throughout the history of philosophy.

Nagel's reformulation of the traditional philosophical problems is precisely an important contribution against this background. If what Nagel has said is true, then, in laying out the general structure and foundation of these problems — the conflict between the subjective and the objective viewpoints, which are fundamental features of human beings, Nagel shows that these problems have a very deep connection with us. In fact, they are *originated from us*.

In this way, the significance of them is redefined. Philosophical problems are worth asking and investigating because on the one hand, the problems themselves *reveal basic facts about us*, and on the other hand, we human beings, given these facts of us, *cannot but ask and pursue the answers* to these problems even though no definite solution is guaranteed. They are all *mortal questions* — questions both *asked by* and *about* human beings.

Therefore, we can see what the greatest contribution of Nagel is. While many others claim that philosophy has already come to an end, Nagel reminds us that we are indeed just at the beginning. Though his solutions may not be definite and final, he gives us a new and, in my opinion, correct

direction in tackling traditional philosophical problems in a way that can do justice to their profundity. In doing so, philosophy is re-established as the pursuit of the ultimate concerns of human beings.

0.3 Why do we need such reformulation?

I have given a brief account of Nagel's main contribution, i.e. project of reformulation of philosophical problems. Whether his reformulation is justified can only be the conclusion of this essay. However, there is a challenge that must first be dealt with before we proceed. One not sharing Nagel's aspiration may reject the very need of reformulation. In other words, instead of showing what is wrong with Nagel's reformulation, one may challenge that we simply do not need any reformulation of this kind at all. Given the fact that no substantial solutions have been found to most traditional philosophical problems, reformulation is needed only if we accept Nagel's view that philosophical problems are real and that they are not solved because they have not been formulated appropriately so far. If we reject this view and take philosophical problems as pseudo-problems, there is no point in asking for any reformulation, because there is nothing to be reformulated.

How can we respond to it? Firstly, we should notice that the challenge itself necessarily involves a certain reformulation of philosophical problems. Those who make this point must give some reason for the claim that all philosophical problems are pseudo-problems. He must at least give an explanation of why such pseudo-problems appear to be real. This explanation involves essentially an account of the *real nature* of philosophical problems, i.e. what philosophical problems are, how they arise, and why they are unreal. But then, what is it if it is not a reformulation of philosophical problems?

Accordingly, we can see that the challenge is in fact not what it appears to be. It is not a challenge of the need of reformulation *per se*, but merely an *alternative reformulation* to that of Nagel. In other words, it is in fact a direct competition between two rival accounts of the nature of philosophical problems on the same level.

Therefore, one cannot discard Nagel's reformulation at the outset, and has to show what is wrong with Nagel's version of reformulation and how his own account is better if he wants to refute him. This, of course, implies a precise understanding, and hence a careful study, of the content and justification of Nagel's project.

0.4 The Approach of This Essay

In this essay, I want to argue that Nagel's general account of the common source of philosophical problems, instead of being dogmatic, is well grounded. The task is to be accomplished by a careful examination of his three central concepts. In Chapter 1, I will discuss the meaning(s) and the (respective) status of "intuition" in Nagel's philosophy. I will argue that though Nagel does rely heavily on our intuition, he is by no means dogmatic and irrational in his trust of it. Then, I will examine Nagel's conception of viewpoint. I will explicate what a viewpoint in general, and subjective and objective viewpoint in particular, are. In Chapter 3, I will investigate Nagel's conception of reality. I will explain what he means by and how he establishes from our intuitions the subjective and the objective reality. Then, I will explore and justify his original claim that all philosophical problems are essentially the results of the conflict between our subjective and objective viewpoints in Chapter 4. Finally, I will make a brief remark of what Nagel regards as the ultimate mystery about us as a conclusion.

1

INTUITION

In arguing for his post-Philosophical culture, Richard Rorty distinguishes two anti-pragmatist groups of philosophers — the *Technical Realists* and the *Intuitive Realists*[6]. Between the two, he argues, intuitive realism is a more basic form of realism:

> What we should conclude, I think, is that technical realism collapses into intuitive realism — that the only debating point the realist has is his conviction that the raising of the good old metaphysical problems...served some good purpose, brought something to light, was important[7].

Accordingly, Rorty tries to show that if intuitive realism is refuted, no viable form of realism is justified and we can only accept his pragmatist diagnosis of philosophical problems. Nagel, whom Rorty labels as one of the representatives of the intuitive realists, becomes his main target.

Though Rorty, in some sense, is correct in calling Nagel an intuitive realist, he is wrong in his argument against him. In this and the following chapters, I want to explicate and defend Nagel's intuitive realism. I will try to argue that Nagel's intuitive realism is more plausible than its pragmatist denial, provided that we have a proper understanding of his conception of intuition and how and what kind of realism can be derived from it.

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[6] Richard Rorty, "Pragmatism and Philosophy", in *After Philosophy: End or Transformation*, Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman, and Thomas McCarthy (ed.), p.36-54.

[7] Ibid., p.45. According to Rorty, *technical realism* refers to the view "that recent, technical developments in the philosophy of language have raised doubt about traditional pragmatist criticisms of the 'correspondence theory of truth,' or, at least, have made it necessary for the pragmatist to answer some hard, technical questions before proceeding further". On the other hand, *intuitive realism*, is essentially "the sense that the depth the human significance, of the traditional textbook 'problems of philosophy' has been underestimated, that pragmatists have lumped real problems together with pseudoproblems in a feckless orgy of 'dissolution'" see p. 36.

1.1 Rorty's Argument Against Intuitive Realism

In his famous paper "Pragmatism and Philosophy", Rorty delivers an argument against intuitive realism and he takes Nagel as his target. I want to argue that though Rorty's argument may be able to render certain forms of intuitive realism as implausible, it fails to refute the Nagelian version. I want to show that the apparent strength of Rorty's argument rests on his inadequate understanding of Nagel's conception of intuition. Even if Rorty's argument works, it works only in a trivial sense against some straw-made versions of intuitive realism, and it does nothing to undermine the Nagelian version. In this section, I will first set out Rorty's argument against intuitive realism. Then, in Section 1.2, I will distinguish three senses of intuition adopted by Nagel and explain the respective meaning of his claim that "one should trust ....intuition over arguments"[8].

The main argument of Rorty against intuitive realism is as follows. The complaint of an intuitive realist is that the pragmatist diagnosis and dissolution of traditional philosophical problems fails to explain and capture our intuitions. In reply, Rorty accepts that charge, but argues that the real issue between the pragmatist and the intuitive realist is concerned precisely with *the status of intuition*[9], i.e. whether we should try to capture these intuitions at all.

He first admits that we *do have* and *cannot escape having* intuitions like "truth is more than assertibility", "there is more to pains than brain states", and "there is a clash between modern physics and our sense of moral responsibility"[10]. He then gives an historicist-anthropological explanation to our having them, claiming that we have those intuitions *because* we "have been educated within an intellectual tradition built around such claims — just as we used to be educated within an intellectual tradition built around such claims as 'If God does not exist, everything is permitted,' 'Man's dignity consists in his link with a supernatural order,' and 'One must not mock holy things'.

[8] Preface, MQ, x.
[9] Rorty, "Pragmatism and Philosophy", p.47.
[10] Ibid., p.45.

If all intuitions are of this nature, and if intuitive realism rests upon our intuitions, it is not warranted. It can at most show that a certain set of problems are fundamental *for a certain culture*, in the sense that "you will not understand a certain period in the history of Europe unless you can get some idea of what it was like to be preoccupied by such questions"[11]. However, the traditional problems are not "deep" in the sense of being able to reveal some fundamental aspects of human being as such, which are not just what appear to be the case for a particular culture, but what is the case. Therefore, Rorty argues that though we do have those intuitions, we had better leave them alone, instead of wasting our time discussing those "deep" problems in the hope of capturing them.

Can Rorty's argument refute Nagel's intuitive realism? I think not. First of all, it is rather doubtful whether Rorty really has an argument. To be sure, Rorty does give a brief historicist-cultural explanation of some of our intuitions, explanation which claims that they are merely the results of our socialization. However, he has never proved that his explanation is the only correct one, and that it can be applied to all our intuitions. What he can show is at most that some of our intuitions may be merely cultural products. To support his view that all intuitions are merely cultural products, Rorty seems to appeal to the following facts:

① Whoever can be said to have any intuition must be educated in a certain culture.
② Different cultures have different sets of intuitions.
③ Some of our once firmly held intuitions are now abandoned or even forgotten, ceasing to be our intuitions anymore.

Neither any one nor any combination of them entail that our intuitions are merely cultural products. In order to justify his pragmatist explanation of our intuitions, Rorty has to prove that:

a) Whatever one inherits from one's culture is *only valid* for this culture;
b) There are no common intuitions among people of different cultures;

[11] Rorty, "Pragmatism and Philosophy", p.47.

c) Even if there are common intuitions, they only represent what are common among the different cultures, rather than what are real.

None of them are self-evident and no substantial argument for them has ever been given. Accordingly, Rorty's account of our intuition is at most *one of the possible* explanations rather than *the only correct* one.

It seems that Rorty himself is aware of this. In saying that he just wants us to change our subject and recommends a new intellectual tradition, he seems to admit that Nagel's claim that we should try our best to capture the intuitions which we cannot escape is an intelligible alternative to his recommendation of ignoring them, and his proposal is in no justified way superior to Nagel's:

> For the pragmatist, the only thing wrong with Nagel's intuitions is that they are being used to legitimize a vocabulary.....that the pragmatist thinks should be eradicated rather than reinforced. But his *only* argument for thinking that these intuitions and vocabularies should be eradicated is that the intellectual tradition to which they belong has not paid off, is more trouble than it is worth, has become an incubus. Nagel's dogmatism of intuitions is no worse, or better, than the pragmatist's inability to give noncircular arguments.[12]

I don't know how one is supposed to be taken seriously if he admits that he has no noncircular argument for his recommendation. My admittance of the irrationality of my suggestion that everyone should eat rubber if they want to be healthy does nothing to reduce its irrationality. Still, Rorty may argue that it is nevertheless an argument: since the Enlightenment intellectual tradition has not paid off, is more trouble than it is worth, and has become an incubus, intuitive realism, which is a contemporary version of this tradition, should be abandoned. It is, however, of little help.

Firstly, if Rorty is not just making some senseless utterance, we find that, in saying that the discouraging history of philosophy supports his claim that there is no real problem of philosophy, he is appealing to that history *as a ground* for his claim. Rorty observes that the history of philosophy indicates that the inquiry of those philosophical problems has resulted in no substantial

[12] Rorty, "Pragmatism and Philosophy", p.54.

success. Several hundred years of effort have failed to reveal any interesting, deep truth which philosophers have been pursuing. Moreover, it is not clear why or in what sense it is something that should bother us, as Nagel insists. To Rorty, it is a welcomed fact, for it *supports* his claim that philosophy has "outlived its usefulness", that there is not any philosophical truth to discover.

However, it is at most a very small part of the truth, as far as what we can see from Rorty. Given that the discouraging history of philosophy *does support* Rorty's claim that philosophy has outlived its usefulness (call it **C1**), it also supports (at least) the following three claims:

C2 Philosophical problems *have not been properly formulated* so far.

C3 Human beings *have not worked hard enough* on these philosophical problems.

C4 Human beings are *not intelligent enough* to solve the problems.

Obviously, the fact that there is no substantial success in philosophy can be validly derived from **C1**, **C2**, **C3** or **C4**. Even if we grant that Rorty is legitimate in appealing to the history of philosophy and that this history is "really" discouraging, and it does support **C1**, it does not imply that **C2**, **C3** and **C4** are wrong. Besides, though, under our assumption, that this history is discouraging can be *a* correct description, it is never proved that it is *the* correct one. Nagel himself has shown us another picture of the history of philosophy, which focuses not on the continual failure of various attempts to answer the philosophical problems, but on the *unceasing revival of the problems*:

> The history of the subject is a continuous discovery of problems that baffle existing concepts and existing methods of solution...historicist interpretation doesn't make philosophical problems go away, any more than the earlier diagnoses of the logical positivists or the linguistic analysts did. To the extent that such no-nonsense theories have an effect, they merely threaten to impoverish the intellectual landscapes for a while by inhibiting the serious expression certain questions. In the name of liberation, these movements have offered us intellectual repression.[13]

If we conceive the history of philosophy in this way, we will arrive at a different conclusion, namely that the history of philosophy supports **C2**, **C3** and **C4**. Of course, Nagel does not appeal to the course of history; he always relies on rational argument. The point I want to make is that if we appeal merely to the history of philosophy, we can arrive at no reliable conclusion, since we can pick up different aspects of it and obtain conflicting results. To decide which conclusion is better, or even which aspect of the same history is relevant, we have to appeal to *further argument*, which means that it is not sufficient to appeal only to the history of philosophy.

Moreover, the assertion that "the Enlightenment intellectual tradition has not paid off, is more trouble than it is worth, and has become an incubus" can support his conclusion only if he can justify that :

a) Nagel's intuitive realism is part of this tradition.

b) Every possibility of this tradition has been explored.

c) Nagel's reformulation of philosophical problems fails to capture our intuitions which are sources of those problems.

Again, he has proved none of them. In fact, if it is Rorty's only argument against Nagel's intuitive realism, it obviously does not work, for his central claim that "the intellectual tradition to which they (the intuitions) has not paid off, is more trouble than it is worth, and has become an incubus" is true *only if* Nagel's project is proved to be impossible by other arguments, and hence cannot be used to refute it.

Suppose there is a class of primary 3. No one in this class has solved the sum 1234+5678 = ____. A hardworking student, Gary, thinks that it can be solved, and thus works hard on it and proposes a solution 6912. Another student, Ray tells the other classmates that Gary is a fool. When asked why he says so, he replies that he does not have any better answer for the sum, or any proof that the sum is unsolvable. His only reason for saying that is simply that so far no one has succeeded in solving that sum. Everyone, he recommends, should better stop thinking about that sum, which probably has no answer. The absurdity of Ray's argument is that if Gary really provides a correct answer to the sum, Ray's assertion that no one in the class has ever

[13] *VFN*, p. 11.

solved it provides nothing against either Gary's effort or the significance of the problem. Rather, he now has to prove that Gary is wrong by argument without appealing to that assertion, if he wants to uphold his belief in the assertion rationally. Similarly, Rorty's central claim that "the intellectual tradition to which they (the intuitions) has not paid off, is more trouble than it is worth, and has become an incubus" assumes that no one can improve that situation, which is true *only if* Nagel's project is proved to be impossible by other independent arguments. If this argument is acceptable, we can also reject Rorty's effort in reviving pragmatism on similar ground.

Furthermore, even if Rorty did prove that Nagel's intuitive realism is some kind of groundless dogmatism, it still could not show that his recommendation is better. It at most shows that both of them are not good enough, and what is most rational to do is to find a third way out. Even if we should change our subject, why must we change as Rorty recommends? Besides, why can't we keep our subject and try some other unattempted approaches, given no other better subject is available?

Above all, even if Rorty's argument works, does it mean that Nagel's intuitive realism is refuted? Again, I do not think it does. According to Rorty, the intuitive realists — including Nagel — claim that "philosophy requires one to do justice to *everybody's* intuitions" [14]. Characterizing intuitive realism in this way, Rorty gives us the impression that it is quite absurd. The problem is whether any intuitive realist, especially Nagel, has this in mind. The answer depends on how we understand that statement.

If it means that we should take into account and consider *in equal terms* (i.e. do justice to) *all intuitions of everybody*, which are so different for different people of different cultures, or even conflicting with each other, and hope that we can miraculously have a resolution which all rational people accept, intuitive realism seems to be quite absurd. However, an intuitive realist need not hold this view. Nagel, particularly, does not commit to the above interpretation. What, then, is his conception of intuition?

[14] Rorty, "Pragmatism and Philosophy", p.46.

1.2 The Priority of Intuition

1.21 The Problem of Intuition

In the Preface of *Mortal Questions*, Nagel states explicitly his "philosophical sympathies and antipathies":

> ...one should trust problems over solutions, *intuition over arguments*, and pluralistic discord over systematic harmony...Given a knockdown argument for an intuitively unacceptable conclusion, one should assume there is probably something wrong with the argument that one cannot detect - *though it is also possible that the source of the intuition has been misidentified.* If arguments or systematic theoretical considerations lead to results that seem intuitively not to make sense, or if a neat solution to a problem does not remove the conviction that the problem is still there, or if a demonstration that some question is unreal leaves us still wanting to ask it, then something is wrong with the argument and more work needs to be done. Often the problem has to be reformulated, because an adequate answer to the original formulation fails to make the sense of the problem disappear. It is always reasonable in philosophy to have great respect for the intuitive sense of an unsolved problem, because in philosophy our methods are always themselves in question, and this is one way of being prepared to abandon them at any point [my emphasis].[15]

The above passage is very important, for it summarizes the basic orientation of Nagel's philosophy. Despite that, it is highly compressed and not really as clear as it appears to be, and thus gives rise to a lot of puzzling question. Why should we trust intuition over argument? What does it mean? Isn't it irrational not to accept a belief that is the product of a "knockdown" argument? Why should we reformulate a philosophical problem when its "adequate" solution is counter-intuitive, instead of discarding our intuitions?

From the passage quoted above, we can see that intuition, which seems to be even more reliable than rational argument, has a very special status in Nagel's project. However, what Nagel really means when he suggests that we should trust intuition over argument is far from clear. As a result, a lot of serious misunderstandings are invited. We are tempted to

[15] Preface, MQ, xi.

draw two mistaken interpretations. Nagel may be interpreted as a defender of *common sense*. Under this interpretation, our intuitions are what we *take for granted* in our *everyday life*, beliefs that we do not question. These commonsensical beliefs in turn *determine* and *justify* other less fundamental beliefs. Since these beliefs are the product of our socialisation, and their content depends on our culture, the education we receive, and any other social factors, they are essentially context-dependent. In other words, people brought up in different cultures may have different sets of common sense, and so Rorty, in claiming that our intuitions reveal merely the particular features of a given culture, may be correct according to this interpretation.

Moreover, Nagel appears to be an *irrationalist*. It is rather bizarre to regard Nagel, who always stresses the importance of rational argument, as an irrationalist. This view, however, seems to be supported by the passage quoted at the beginning of this section. If Nagel rests his theory on intuitions, trusts intuitions over arguments and recommends that "[g]iven a knockdown argument for an intuitively unacceptable conclusion, one should assume there is probably something wrong with the argument that one cannot detect", and intuitions are just our commonsensical beliefs, it seems to follow that what we accept in our everyday life, no matter what their sources are, determine what we should believe. What is rational is *determined*, instead of *determining*, by our common sense[16].

Consequently, it seems we have to admit that it is quite impossible to settle any conflict among intuitions. For, if our intuitions are what we base our justification on, they cannot themselves be justified by anything else, and we can employ no independent criteria to judge whether they are justified.

Worse than that, the term 'intuition" is ambiguous and Nagel himself employs the term in different senses in different situations without ever trying

[16] For example, Vinit Haksar takes Nagel exactly as an irrational defender of commonsense: "Like many sceptics Nagel in the end seems to fall back on our *commonsense intuitions*. In the case of bats he simply assumes that bats have an inner life. His discussions of moral issues as well as metaphysical issues in the book are usually based on the assumption that our intuitions are sound. He points out that he trusts intuition over arguments; when arguments and theoretical considerations clash with our intuitions, something is wrong with the arguments, and this may justify Nagel's belief that bats have an inner life. But he carries this trust too far. In fact, it is this excessive trust that leads to his *irrationalism*. For as we saw earlier if we are willing to abandon some of our subjective intuitions, we could avoid the clash between the subjective and the objective approaches" (my italic). See his "Nagel on Subjective and Objective", in *Inquiry 24*, p. 113. We will come back to discuss his paper in chapter

to explain what he means clearly. In fact, it appears that he only *asserts*, without any explicit argument, that we should trust our intuition. As a result, the issue of whether Nagel's project is significant may be reduced to just a matter of whether one accepts Nagel's attitude toward *his* intuitions or not. Someone who does not share Nagel's respect for intuition, or who holds a different set of intuitions, can simply ignore Nagel's project.

It is then obvious that without a proper understanding of Nagel's conception of intuition, we cannot even make sense of his project of reformulating philosophical problems. Therefore, I am going to show that, though Nagel has great respect for intuition, he is neither a diehard defender of (no matter whose) common sense, nor an irrationalist who distrusts the authority of reason. In what follows, I want to provide an explication of and an argument for the claims of the above passage. It will be divided into two parts. Firstly, I will try to clarify the concept of "intuition", exploring the different senses it carries and their respective roles in Nagel's theory. Through this clarification, I will argue that what Nagel trusts is *not* our common sense but something much deeper, in the sense that all *reflective rational beings have reason to endorse*. In specifying the nature of this deep intuition, I hope to show that Nagel's reliance on intuition is rational. Then, I will show how his project of reformulating philosophical problems can in turn be justified by this rational reliance on intuition.

1.22 Intuition as Intuitive Perception

Early in this century, the term "intuition" is usually understood as "*intuitive power*", referring to "an intellectual power of arriving at abstract truths"[17], a capacity or faculty which enable us to "see" a particular kind of truth directly without any inference. Derivatively, "intuition" sometimes refers to "*intuitive knowledge*", that which we grasp through our power of intuition. It is specifically used to refer to kinds of knowledge that are in some sense immediate, certain and a priori, e.g. mathematical or, to some, ethical truths.

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[17] Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 93-94.

However, it is not what Nagel has in mind. In saying that we should trust our intuition over argument, he never means that what is obtained by our mysterious intuitive power is in any sense superior to what is arrived at with our reason. That Nagel is an unyielding defender of the authority of universal reason is evident in all his works, and he devotes a whole book in defending the objectivity of reason as the "last word" in different forms of inquiry[18]. In fact, he writes clearly just before the passage quoted at the beginning of this section that:

> It is important to try to avoid making claims that are vague, obscure, or unfounded, and to maintain high standards of evidence and argument. But other values are also important, some of which make it difficult to keep thing neat.[19]

What need to be done here is to provide a coherent interpretation of the relation between his trust of intuitions and appeal to reason as the final judge. That is what I am going to do in this section.

What does Nagel mean by "intuition"? In my opinion, Nagel employs the term in mainly two senses, both are equally important but play different roles in his theory. On the one hand, he takes "intuition" as a kind of *direct perception,* while on the other hand, he refers to a certain set of *beliefs*. "Intuitions" in the latter sense fall into two categories – the *revisable* and the *unrevisable* intuitions. Basing on this analysis, I will show that the meaning of Nagel's claim that we should trust intuitions over arguments is threefold.

Let us begin with "intuition" in the first sense. Nagel uses the term to refer to what we apprehend and cognise immediately. "Intuitions", in this sense, means our direct *perceptions* and *recognition* (and the related and/or resulted *senses* and *feelings*) of the world, ourselves, and the relation between us. For example, the very problem of free will, according to Nagel, is "a *bafflement* of our feelings and attitudes – a loss of confidence, conviction or equilibrium"[20]. The paradoxical phenomenon of moral luck, he writes, is the result of the "*perception* of one of the ways in which the intuitively acceptable

[18] Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (Oxford University Press, 1997.)
[19] Preface, MQ, x.
[20] *VFN*, p.112, my italics.

conditions of moral judgement threaten to undermine it all"[21]. And Nagel writes that the philosophical sense of absurdity of life "must arise from the *perception* of something universal – some respect in which pretension and reality inevitably clash for us all"[22].

Such perceptions need not be the products of some of our mysterious faculties. Nor must they be, as usually ascribed to intuitive knowledge, in any sense *absolute, certain* or *a priori*. Indeed, it is not appropriate to regard them as *knowledge* at all if we understand "knowledge" as the set of true *beliefs*. What is essential to them is just that they are *direct* or *immediate*, in the sense that they are obtained without evident rational thought or inference, and that they are *preverbal*, i.e. not formulated verbally yet. Intuitions are just what we are aware of vaguely before we express them in propositions.

"Intuition" in this sense is very important and has a special priority for Nagel. When he says that the real *source* of philosophical problems is our intuition, what he has in mind is this *intuitive perception* [23]:

> ...philosophy is not like a particular language. Its *sources* are preverbal and often precultural, and one of its most difficult tasks is to express unformed but *intuitively felt* problems in language without losing them [my emphasis].[24]

Indeed, the main theme of the Nagelian project is exactly to provide precise verbal formulations for those intuitive perceptions which give rise to senses and feelings of bafflement we obtain as a result of our interaction with the world. In doing so, Nagel hopes to identify what the problems really consist in and thus what the right direction of our search for their solution should be. To understand this, we must first understand how, according to Nagel, philosophical problems arise.

No one will object that the main theme of Nagel's philosophy is human being. What Nagel relentlessly endeavours to deal with are those *mortal questions*, the questions *of* human beings. They are important problems we

[21] "Moral Luck", in *MQ*, p. 27, my Italics.
[22] "The Absurd", in *MQ*, p. 13, my Italics.
[23] It is my terminology and Nagel has never used it. Here, "perception" should be understood in a boarder sense, referring roughly to all forms of awareness, including senses and feelings.
[24] *VFN*, p.11.

all *face* and are *puzzled* about — the problems of mind-body relation, freedom, value, sex, the meaning of life, death, political ideal, war, what one should believe and what one should do. They all seem to be inevitable to us. People start wondering at the amazement of the nature of the world and human beings in their young age, without knowing any philosopher or philosophical theory. We encounter them in our everyday life, in our *reflection* upon our being in the world. In other words, these problems basically are not the products of philosophy; philosophy does not create its own problems. Quite the reverse, it is the result of our attempt to make sense of ourselves. We all seem to have a natural, intuitive and pre-theoretical *perception* of the problems. We just can't help asking them once we begin to reflect upon ourselves, despite the fact that we have not got any conclusive solution so far.

The basic concern of Nagel is always the problems themselves. Accordingly, philosophy, to Nagel, is primarily a discourse dealing with these problems. It consists of two parts: the attempt to ask the questions and the attempt to answer them. Usually, one concentrates on the latter, taking a particular formulation of a certain problem for granted, and then proposing different arguments and solutions to it. Sometimes we even seem to find the "solution". It is, however, the former that is vital. How a question is asked to a large extent determines what kinds of answer are available. If a question is not formulated in an appropriate way, it will simply miss the point and fail to address the very issue involved.

To Nagel, it is precisely one of the main problems with some of the contemporary philosophers. These philosophers claim to have put an end to the inquiry of some or all of the philosophical problems, in one way or other. They can roughly be divided into two groups. One of them claims to have dissolved most, if not all, of the philosophical problems through linguistic or cultural / historical analysis. These problems are shown to be the result of the misuse of language or the products of cultural/historical circumstances, and thus unreal or at most the residue of a particular language. Philosophy is then reduced to either conceptual analysis or cultural/historical study, or even a dispensable, clumsy way of viewing the world[25].

[25] Taking philosophical problems as pseudo-problems arising from (the misuse or imperfection of)

On the other hand, there are those who do ask and claim to have provided solutions to these questions. But in doing so they usually assume a particular method (usually the scientific ones) and formulate the questions in such a way that for some of the questions, the solutions are guaranteed by that method, while others are simply excluded as being meaningless. With these final solutions, philosophical problems are either solved or dissolved, and philosophy is no more[26].

Despite the claim of these two groups of philosophers, Nagel remains totally unconvinced. Even though we are told either that all these problems are unreal or that the real ones have already been solved, Nagel observes that, for most of them, we just cannot stop asking them again. To Nagel, the most important thing is not merely to get solutions, but the appropriate ones. An appropriate solution, if there is any, must be one that is of an *appropriate* question, a question that is formulated appropriately. A given formulation of a particular problem is not appropriate unless *it can capture our preverbal intuitive perception of the essential sense of the problem that generates the problem*. Understood in this way, an appropriate formulation does not necessarily guarantees a neat and easy answer. On the contrary, it is usually the sign of posing a wrong question that a certain simple but *unconvincing* solution is proved to be the adequate one for the question. It may be the right answer for that particular formulation of the problem, but not that for the original problem. An appropriate formulation itself must reveal to us why they are so puzzling and why they are so difficult to solve (or even not solvable). What matter, what generate the need for philosophy, are our intuitive perceptions of our situation, the problems encountered in life. Formulations

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language and taking philosophy as only conceptual analysis is the common attitude among logical positivist (e.g. A. J. Ayer, Carnap and the Vienna Circle) and the ordinary language philosophers (e.g. Gilbert Ryle and John Austin). The most important representative is, of course, Ludwig Wittgenstein, see his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and *Philosophical Investigation*. Another contemporary example is Michael Dummett, who conceives realism as a "semantic thesis" which "involves acceptance, for statements of the given class, of the principle of bivalence", see "Realism" in his *The Seas of Language*, p. 230. Regarding philosophers taking philosophy as only cultural/historical analysis, see Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, and, in the field of ethics, Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*.

[26] An important representative of this reductive attitude is Daniel C. Dennett, see his *Consciousness Explained*. For Nagel's critique of Dennett, see chapter 7 "Dennett: Content and Consciousness" and chapter 8 "Dennett: Consciousness Dissolved" of *OM*, p. 82-89.

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which fail to do justice to the problems, especially those which lead to the dismissal of the problems, are for that reason inadequate and even problematic. What we need most are the right questions — the appropriate formulations of the problems. Therefore, the fundamental task of philosophy, according to Nagel, is to "express unformed but intuitively felt problems in language without losing them"[27].

It is exactly what Nagel has been doing in his writings. Nagel has never provided any solution, in the sense of a definite answer which puts a full stop to the pursuit of the problem, to any philosophical problem, directly or indirectly. It is simply not his main focus. Nagel labouriously works on the formulation of these problems over and over again and drills deeper and deeper. We can say that he deliberately stays in this fundamental stage of philosophical reflection in case there is any hasty and ungrounded leap to the pseudo-solution. To him, we are at a too early stage to answer the questions, since *we do not even have the appropriate questions to answer.* Before the right track is set, we cannot go anywhere without missing our destination. Therefore, Nagel's main concern is to reveal and account for our intuitive perceptions, the "sense of misery" we have regarding the philosophical problems. He does it by first showing how the available formulation of a particular problem is inadequate and hence how its best solution (or dissolution) fails to eliminate our puzzlement about it. Then, he argues for a reformulation of the problems indicating where the real problem lies, and what the form of the real solution should take.

From the above discussion (which is largely an exposition of the passage quoted at the beginning of this section), we can have a preliminary understanding of why, for Nagel, we should trust intuitions over argument. At first glance, we should trust them because they are the real sources of the philosophical problems, and so the fact that an answer fails to do justice to them provides good *reason* for us to re-examine it. If the answer is proved to be adequate to the problem formulated in a certain way, we then have good reason to question the formulation. Despite that, we should be very careful *not* to exaggerate this trust of intuitions and interpret it as a trust of intuitions

[27] *VFN*, p.11.

over *reason*. To Nagel, reason always has the last word and cannot be displaced even by intuition. It can be noticed from the fact that a belief's being counter-intuitive is itself a *reason* for our distrust of it. However, we can make full sense of Nagel's claim only after we have understood his employment of intuition in the sense of *intuitive belief*.

1.23 Intuition as Intuitive Belief

In the last section, we have examined one sense of intuition adopted by Nagel, i.e. intuition as *intuitive perception*, which is the source of philosophical problems. Accordingly, we have a rough explanation of why we should trust intuition over argument. We should do so because the solution of a particular problem is supposed to account for and, ideally, remove our sense of puzzlement generated by our intuitive perceptions. If the solution fails to accomplish any of the tasks, it seems to be a *prima facie* reason for doubting the validity of the solution, even if it is derived from rational arguments. I admit that it is vague and incomprehensive at this stage, but let us just put it side for the time being and examine the other sense of intuition employed by Nagel. Vagueness and obscurity will be, I hope, dispersed in the course of our discussion.

As we have mentioned, there are different senses of "intuition" — as a mysterious *faculty*, as a special kinds of *knowledge* attained by it, or as intuitive *perceptions*. However, "intuitions" is most commonly used in current philosophical discussions, especially in practical ethics, in the sense of "*intuitive beliefs*", which refers roughly to our spontaneous convictions, a specific set of verbally formulated *beliefs* which we take for granted pre-reflectively, accept immediately without resorting to any rational argument. In other words, they are more or less equal to our commonsensical beliefs, except that they are "deeper" and more fundamental, in the sense that they *pre-reflectively* seem to be what we cannot but accept, and need no justification. Instead, other beliefs are derived from and sometimes justified by them.

Nagel sometimes use "intuitions" to refer to this commonsensical beliefs, especially in his discussion of ethical and political issues. We can

substitute "intuition" for "common sense" in the passage below without changing its meaning:

> Common sense suggests that each of us should live his own life (autonomy), give special consideration to certain others (obligation), have some significant concern for the general good (neutral values), and treat the people he deals with decently (deontology). It also suggests that these aims may produce serious inner conflict. [28]

And he once remarked that the question "do our intuitions of moral requirements on action have any objective basis, or are they mere intuitions, internally consistent but without objects?" a familiar issue from ethics[29].

If by trusting intuition over argument Nagel means we should always trust commonsensical beliefs whenever they conflict with other beliefs which are supported by rational argument, it seems that Nagel is an irrational defender of our commonsense. Furthermore, since the sets of commonsensical beliefs are different for people of different communities and even the same community in different historical epochs, and they have the ultimate authority in justification, relativism seems then to be inevitable.

Here, we should be very careful about the nature of these intuitions as a special kind of commonsensical beliefs. Although we take them for granted pre-reflectively, it does not mean that they are necessary truths that can never be revised or abandoned *on reflection*. For example, it was an intuitive belief for the ancient Greeks (and even Aristotle) that some people were born to be slaves. They simply took it for granted and devised their social-political system upon it (and other accepted beliefs). However, not much civilized people accept this view anymore. Rather, the belief that everyone is equal by birth (whatever it means) becomes our intuition nowadays. Of course, it may turn out that we are wrong and the former view is indeed correct, but the point is that this kind of belief is *revisable* in the light adequate reason. Therefore, for Nagel, although intuitions as commonsensical beliefs should be respected, they do not override reason.

To distinguish this kind of intuitive belief from the one I am going to

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[28] *VFN*, p. 166.
[29] *POA*, p.57.

discuss, let us call them *revisable intuitive beliefs*. Two points that are closely related should be noticed about them. Firstly, since revisable intuitive beliefs are what we begin (our theoretical reflection and practical decision) with, they need not be revised or abandoned under normal circumstances. In other words, they are beliefs that we should accept *if there is no sufficient reason against them*. Nevertheless, they are revisable in the sense that they are not immune from rational criticism. They *can be* revised or even abandoned if we have sufficient reason to do so. In this sense, they are *not indubitable*. In Nagel's own words:

> Common sense doesn't have the last word in ethics or anywhere else, but it has...the first word: it should be examined before it is discarded.[30]

On the other hand, there is another set of intuitive beliefs that are indubitable, in the sense that it is *impossible for them to be doubted rationally*. To make the distinction clear, let us call them *unrevisable intuitive beliefs*. They represent facts that are undeniable and there is no other alternative than taking them as objectively true. What I have in mind is what Nagel calls *Cartesian thoughts*, thoughts that no one can attempt to doubt without immediately discovering the doubt to be unintelligible:

> However reasonable it may be to entertain doubts as to the validity of some of what one does under the heading of reasoning, such doubts cannot avoid involving some form of reasoning themselves, and the priorities I have been talking about show up in what we fall back on as we try to distance ourselves from more and more thoughts.... Certain forms of thought can't be intelligibly doubted because they force themselves into every attempt to think about anything.[31]

Is it appropriate to interpret Nagel's Cartesian thoughts as unrevisable intuitive beliefs? Clearly, Nagel never employs my terminology. Besides, the examples of Cartesian thoughts he discusses most are not some particular beliefs but *forms of thought*. Worse than that, he seems to have said something against this interpretation:

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[30] *VFN*, p.166.

> Again, let me emphasize that I am not talking about a set of unrevisable beliefs (though I believe the simplest rules of logic are unrevisable)...It is possible to accept a form of rationalism without committing oneself to a closed set of self-evident foundational truths.[32]

On what ground, then, can we interpret these Cartesian thoughts as unrevisable intuitive beliefs? To make sense of our interpretation, we must first understand what Nagel takes "Cartesian thoughts" to be. In his latest book *The Last Word*, Nagel tries to defend the objectivity of our understanding and justification against those he groups under the name "subjectivists". His main idea is that though it is possible and sometimes rational to suspect that many of our beliefs and their justifications are just reflecting our cultural and psychological makeup, we cannot take everything as subjective in this manner. According to Nagel, there are thoughts (revealed by Descartes in his meditation) which "we cannot get outside of", thoughts that we cannot form any external account of (i.e. a psychological or cultural explanation of all kinds of our knowledge or reasoning) and that we simply "think straight":

> There are some types of thoughts that we cannot avoid simply having — that it is strictly impossible to consider merely from the outside, because they enter inevitably and directly into any process of considering ourselves from the outside, allowing us to construct the conception of a world in which, as a matter of objective fact, we and our subjective impressions are contained.[33]

Suppose a person **X** holds a certain belief ***p*** which is thought to be objective, representing what is the case independently. Another person **Y** can challenge that ***p*** is indeed subjective, reflecting only what *from the perspective of* ***X*** is the case. In other words, ***p*** is *merely* the result of and hence justified by the psychological states, socialization and cultural indoctrination of **X**. Anyone who does not share all these with **X** need not believe in ***p***; and if we can show that the social norms or traditions from which ***p*** is derived are

[31] *LW*, p. 61.
[32] *LW*, p. 69.
[33] *LW*, p. 19.

irrational, we can reject ***p***. In fact, many unreasonable beliefs are discarded in this way, and the process plays a significant role for the growth of knowledge.

However, it will be a completely different case if we take all kinds of belief, reasoning and justification to be subjective. There must be at least some kinds of thought that are objective, and whose objectivity cannot be doubted intelligibly. For **Y** to claim that ***p*** is just a subjective belief of **X** sensibly, it must be understood as an objective claim, i.e. stating what is the case *in itself*, and not just for **Y**. In other words, whenever anyone makes a claim that any belief is subjective, he must regard this claim objective, since:

> The concept of subjectivity always demands an objective framework, within which the subject is located and his special perspective or set of responses described.[34]

It can be explained in the following way. When **Y** claims that ***p*** is subjective or relative to a particular perspective, he must at least give an explanation of ***p*** — of its nature and its source, and justify why it is valid for **X** *only*. To be convincing, he must at least admit that **X** is wrong (for certain reasons) in taking ***p*** as something objective. Moreover, he must argue that his claim (***q***) that ***p*** *is subjective* does not commit the same mistake as ***p***. That is, **Y** must commit to the thought that ***q*** is not just what he believes, but is objectively true. If it is not the case, **Y** would mean that it is *from his perspective only* that ***p*** is just the product of the interplay of the particular psychological, cultural and historical factors of **X** and **X** is wrong in taking ***p*** to be objective. However, ***q***, then, can not undermine ***p*** as it appears when understood in the above way. Any claim of criticism of any belief as subjective must itself be objective for it to make sense.

Suppose **X** claims that:

***p'*:** There is some thought which is objective.

Y can refute ***p'*** only if he can show that:

***q'*:** No thought is objective.

Which of them is right? How can we determine? There seems to be two possibilities — we either (1) choose arbitrarily, or (2) make the choice through evaluating the reasons for and against the claims rationally. Which one should we take? It seems that if we take (1), we can choose either ***p'*** or ***q'***, and none of them is more preferable than the other. It suggests that ***q'*** is at least as good as ***p'***. *But why should we choose (1)*? The question itself demands an answer that is supported by reason. (1) should at least be supported by the claim that:

r: No rational argument is needed in choosing (1) and (2).

The point, however, is that ***r*** needs argument too! Even if someone recommend us to choose (1) by saying that (1) is easier to do, we can only understand him as meaning that:

a) We should choose whatever is easier to do.
b) (1) is easier to do than (2)

Therefore:

c) We should choose (1) instead of (2).

Obviously, a)-c) is an argument. It means that it is inevitable to appeal to reason, and it is not begging the question, since:

> The charge of begging the question implies that there is an alternative — namely, to examine the reasons for and against the claim being challenged while suspending judgment about it. For the case of reasoning itself, however, no such alternative is available, since any considerations against the objective validity of a type of reasoning are inevitably attempts to offer reasons against it, and these must be rationally assessed.[35]

In other word, it is not intelligible for us to question the objectivity of reasoning *per se*. Given any proposition ***s***, we cannot but, either explicitly or implicitly, give reason for or against it, *or* for or against *the need of giving reason for or*

[34] *LW*, p.16.

against it, if we take ***s*** not to be just a series of symbols but proposition that conveys thought. We can question the objective validity of a particular type of reasoning, but we can do so only by providing reasoning of another type. There is simply no escape.

This, being objectively valid, in turn, refutes ***q***'. Though not all thoughts are objective, at least some of them are. Among all objective thoughts, Nagel calls those that "resist being undermined by considerations of the contingency of our makeup, the possibility of deception"[36] *Cartesian thoughts*. In *The Last Word*, Nagel concerns mainly about "framework of methods and forms of thought that reappear whenever we call any specific propositions into question" [37]. Although he does not positively discuss specific beliefs to which there is no alternative, he does admit this possibility[38]. In fact, he, following Descartes, takes "I exist" to be one of them[39], and this leaves room for interpreting Cartesian thought as unrevisable intuitive belief. In what is left in this section, I will try to justify my interpretation by showing how the thought "I exist", which is an example of Cartesian thoughts, is an unrevisable intuitive belief.

On the one hand, "I exist" is an *intuitive belief*. Firstly, it is the verbal formulation of one of our *intuitive perception*, the perception of the fact that I exist. Once it is so formulated, it is an instance of our spontaneous convictions, a belief that we take for granted pre-reflectively and accept immediately without resorting to any rational argument. Besides, it is fundamental, in the sense that they pre-reflectively seem to be what we cannot but accept, and need no justification, and is presupposed by most of our beliefs. On the other hand, it is *unrevisable*. It is an instance of *Cartesian thought*, which cannot be rationally regarded merely as subjective. I can mistake my identity, memory, physical features and anything about me *except* the fact that I exist, because *my* doubt about myself is impossible if I do not exist. In other words, my doubt about my existence inevitably implies

[35] *LW*, p. 24.
[36] *LW*, p. 20.
[37] *LW*, p. 69.
[38] "The thing to which there is no alternative *may include some specific beliefs*, but in general it will not have that character (my emphasis) ", *LW*, p.69.
[39] *LW*, p. 20.

my existence, rendering the doubt unintelligible.

Accordingly, we can generalize our discussion of the nature of the specific belief "I exist" to say that a belief is an unrevisable intuitive belief if and only if:

(I) It is what we take for granted, or at least can easily be recognized
without any, or with minimal, reflection. (i.e. intuitive)

(II) Once it is recognized, it is impossible, in the sense of unintelligible, for us to doubt it rationally, since any act of doubting presupposes it. (i.e. unrevisable)

To put it in another way, we can say that the class of *unrevisable intuitive belief* is the product of the class of intuitive belief and the class of Cartesian thought. Of course, as we have seen, not all intuitive beliefs are unrevisable and it may not be the case that all Cartesian thoughts are intuitive beliefs[40]. However, there are at least some beliefs, such as "I exist", which are intuitive and unrevisable. And, as Nagel says:

> ...once the existence of a single thought that we cannot get outside of is recognized, it becomes clear that the number and variety of such thoughts may be considerable. It isn't only "I exist" that keeps bouncing back at us in response to every effort to doubt it: Something similar is true of other thoughts which, even if they do not always carry the same certainty, still resist being undermined by considerations of the contingency of our makeup, the possibility of deception, and so forth.[41]

[40] It appears that Nagel divides all Cartesian thoughts into two groups — framework of methods or forms of thoughts, and particular beliefs (*LW*, p. 69). I believe that the distinction is rough. The framework or form of thought itself is expressed in belief or sets of beliefs. What Nagel really means is that these beliefs are inescapable because they specify the forms of thought to which there *is no alternative*. The belief "If p then q, p, therefore q" is not only a logical truth we cannot be believe, but also specifies how we must think, i.e. our thought is sensible only if it is not contradictory with the belief. Similarly, "There is a way the world objectively is" and "There are ways we should act" are not merely beliefs we should accept. They also specify the way of how we are most rational to think, i.e. it is always more plausible that we should, at the outmost limit, think of the way the world is and the way we should act *independent of any conceiving perspectives* than taking a subjective view. It may be the case that all Cartesian thoughts are unrevisable intuitive beliefs, but I need not make this claim to justify my interpretation. This is enough for me to show that at least *some* of them are.

[41] *LW*, p. 20.

What else, then, are unrevisable intuitive beliefs? Some paradigmatic examples will be "I am thinking", "I mean something by my words"[42] and "There is some way the world is"[43]. In the following chapters, I will consider some of the candidates and explain how Nagel's view of reality and hence his conception of philosophy can be justified upon them. Before that, let us first justify Nagel's trust of intuition over argument in the light of what we have said so far.

1.24 Trusting Intuition over Argument

So far, we have discussed what the term "intuition" is meant by Nagel in different contexts. To Nagel, "intuition" sometimes refers to "intuitive perception", and sometimes refers to "intuitive belief". Regarding the latter case, it can refer to either "revisable intuitive belief" or "unrevisable intuitive belief". Basing on this distinction, we can now examine what Nagel really means when he claims that we should trust our intuitions over argument. In this section, I will try to show that there are different senses of "trusting intuition over argument" corresponding to different senses of "intuition" and how each of them can be justified in a way compatible with the acknowledgment of the authority of reason.

As mentioned, the generation of a philosophical problem and the search for its solution consists in the following procedure. In encountering the world and ourselves in everyday life, we develop some intuitive perceptions, sometimes with corresponding senses and feelings of puzzlement. These senses and feelings drive us to think about them and demand some explanations that can to some extent eliminate this bafflement. We begin by identifying what the problems are through attempting precise verbal formulations to them. According to these formulations, we produce some hypotheses, identify and justify some relevant beliefs as the premises, and then derive our conclusions from them. That is, there are mainly four stages:

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[42] *LW*, p. 44. "Just as I cannot doubt whether I exist, I cannot doubt whether any of my words have meaning, because in order for me to doubt that, the words I use in doing so must have meaning."
[43] *LW*, p. 81.

① Identification and formulation of the problem

② Identification of all the relevant premises

③ Justification of all the relevant premises

④ Deducing the conclusion from all the justified relevant premises

If a philosophical problem is formulated *appropriately*, and a certain solution is derived from a *sound argument* (i.e. a valid argument with true premises) under this formulation, our intuitive uneasiness towards it, even for Nagel, is impotent in justifying our doubt about the solution. Nor can we appeal to our intuitive beliefs that conflict with it. It seems to be more likely that we should revise or even abandon them in the light of this. *Under the circumstances*, i.e. under the *assumption* that all ①-④ are properly done, we must *trust argument over intuitions*, because our intuition cannot provide us with reason to doubt the argument even if its conclusion is counter-intuitive *in this case*.

Suppose a person Mr. O gives an argument ***A*** for a solution ***S*** to a particular philosophical problem ***P***. Nagel is accused of being an irrationalist precisely because he seems to maintain:

C We should reject or doubt ***S***, even if ***A*** is sound, *if* ***S*** is counter-intuitive.

For some, ***C*** is equal to:

C# We should reject or doubt ***S***, even if ***A*** is sound, *if* ***S*** seems strange to us.

It seems to be clear that ***C#*** is irrational. If Nagel really holds ***C***, and ***C*** is equal to ***C#***, he seems to be an irrationalist. Can Nagel escape the accusation? I think he can. Firstly, ***C*** is different from ***C#***. ***C*** is equal to ***C#*** if and only if "being counter-intuitive" is equal to "being strange to us", and it is not, at least not to Nagel. Though what is counter-intuitive is usually strange to us, not everything strange is counter-intuitive, and most of the beliefs that seems strange to us when first encountered can be accepted without the

need of giving up our fundamental beliefs. Therefore, ***C*** would be equal to ***C#*** only if we take "being strange to us" as meaning "being so strange that it threatens our fundamental beliefs". Then, the apparent ridiculousness of **C** can be reduced.

Of course, Mr. O will not be satisfied. "You have not addressed the main issue. Though ***C*** is not equal to ***C#***, ***C*** itself is irrational. If ***S*** is supported by a rational argument and you refuse to accept it by appealing to your intuition, you are still an irrationalist. You can call yourself an intuitionist, but you have to admit that all intuitionists are, in taking intuition as a higher authority than reason, irrationalists."

Is the challenge justified? It depends on how we interpret ***C***. In fact, ***C*** is a poor formulation even if there is truth in it. As I have said, Nagel explicitly gives the last word to reason, and he would raise no objection to any solution *if it is appropriately formulated and supported by a sound argument*, even if it is counter-intuitive. The main point, however, is that in ordinary practice, *this very assumption is by no means justified*. It is always possible for us to make mistakes in any one of the four stages mentioned above, and in most cases:

> ...reasoning provides us not with proof but only with reasons for believing a conclusion likely, or for preferring it somewhat to the alternatives...The reasons that support a conclusion do not typically rule out the possibility of its falsity, even if they are very strong.....Often reasoning in the strict sense does not support our conclusions directly but only justifies us in trusting or distrusting the more particular judgments and intuitions that occur to us naturally, or as the result of experience.[44]

As Nagel says, "an examination of what is wrong with the conclusion may shed some light on what is wrong with the argument"[45]. How can a solution supported by an argument be problematic? It can be so in two aspects. Firstly, it is sometimes not as clear as one thinks whether one's argument is *really sound* as it appears. The problem is more on the truth and/or the justification of the premises than on the validity of the form of the

[44] *LW*, p. 78.
[45] *VFN*, p. 95.

argument. It is relatively easier to determine whether an argument, given a set of premises, is valid or not. It is, however, always possible that there are flaws one has not detected or cannot detect, given our existing capacity (e.g. analytic power) and available knowledge (empirical or otherwise). On the one hand, premises thought to be true may be in fact false, and there may be some implicit premises that are not self-evident but have never been established. On the other hand, our acceptance of a certain premise may be the result of certain criteria of truth or justification, or methodologies that are themselves problematic:

> It is always reasonable in philosophy to have great respect for the intuitive sense of an unsolved problem, because in philosophy our methods are always themselves in question, and this is one way of being prepared to abandon them at any point.[46]

All these possibilities are not ruled out by the fact that the solution does follow from the given premises. However, it seems that we always ignore these possibilities. Having given a carefully considered argument, we always tend to think that we have found the solution. It is natural since we all have such an irresistible desire for solutions that we tend to close our eyes and shut down our brains as soon as we *think* that we have got ones. Such belief, however, is not justified. We should always bear one simply rule in logic in mind: The truth of the conclusion of a valid argument is preserved *if and only if* all the premises are true.

Secondly, even if we can show that the argument is not only valid but also sound and that the conclusion does follow from it, it is still *possible* that this conclusion may not be the appropriate solution to our original problem. It is because it is always possible that the very formulation of the problem itself is problematic. That is, the formulation fails to capture the essential sense of the problem, which drives us to work out such formulation. In this case, the solution can still be rejected as inadequate since the real problem has not be addressed yet.

All the things said above are just, of course, possibilities so far, and

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[46] *MQ*, xi.

whether it is actually the case needs to be argued. So, what can *justify* our doubt about the validity of the solution? What give us reason to doubt about the soundness of an argument and the appropriateness of the formulation of the problem? It is, according to Nagel, the fact that the proposed solution is counter-intuitive — "intuitively unacceptable", "intuitive not to make sense", or it "does not remove the conviction that the problem is still there".[47] Nagel's argument goes like this:

❶ We should accept ***S*** if ***P*** is formulated appropriately *and* ***A*** is sound.

❶ implies that:

❷ If ***S*** is unacceptable, we at least have reason to doubt that either ***A*** is unsound *or* that ***P*** is not formulated appropriately.

According to Nagel,

❸ ***S*** is unacceptable if it is counter-intuitive.

Therefore,

❹ If ***S*** is counter-intuitive, we have reason to doubt that either ***A*** is unsound *or* ***P*** is not formulated appropriately.

At this point, we are back to the central issue of our discussion. ❹ is my formulation of Nagel's claim that we should trust intuition over argument. How should we understand it? Firstly, we should notice that in making the claim, Nagel *does not* use the term "argument" to refer to the general employment of reason, but only *the particular employment of it under a particular formulation of a problem*. In other words, Nagel *does not* mean that our intuitive perceptions or intuitive beliefs are always responsible for the final verdict, that we should always reject judgments that conflict with it, *even if* we have strong *reason* to believe that they are true. For Nagel, reason is always the final judge and we should always believe what we have the strongest reason to believe. The question now becomes: What does it mean to trust our intuition over argument while acknowledging the ultimate authority of reason in justification simultaneously? The general answer is that our intuition provides us with *reason* to doubt the particular employment of reason in a particular problem under a particular formulation. It should be noticed that even in this particular case, *the last word is given to reason* — we trust our

[47] Preface, *MQ*, x.

intuitive uneasiness *because* it provides us with *reason* to doubt. Or, in the case of intuitive beliefs, we trust them *because* it is rational to do so.

Why is it, then, the case that ***S***'s being counter-intuitive is a reason for us to doubt ***S***? As we have seen in the last two sections, Nagel employs "intuition" in three different senses — *intuitive perception*, *revisable intuitive belief* and *unrevisable intuitive belief*. Accordingly, there are three senses of "being counter-intuitive", and the reasons corresponding to them are, though related, different.

With respect to our *intuitive perception*, which is the source of philosophical problems, ***S*** is counter-intuitive if it fails to eliminate our sense of bafflement. On the one hand, ***S*** may claim to have solved ***P*** but leave us think that there is still something wrong. On the other hand, ***S*** may, in the form of therapeutic dissolution, claim to have proved that ***P*** is unreal and we should not pursue its answer, but fails to convince us that there is no such problem at all. All these are counter-intuitive in the sense that they are not in accord with our intuitive perception of the existence of ***P***. Since this intuitive perception is the source of ***P***, the fact that ***S*** fails to answer its demand is a *reason* for us to doubt its validity, as Nagel says:

> ...if a neat solution to a problem does not remove the conviction that the problem is still there, or if a demonstration that some question is unreal leaves us still wanting to ask it, then something is wrong with the argument and more work needs to be done. Often the problem has to be reformulated, because an adequate answer to the original formulation fails to make the sense of the problem disappear.[48]

Our critic, Mr. O, may object that we should not trust our intuitive perception on the ground that we may mistake this vague "sense of bafflement" and that it may be corrupted by custom, self-interest, or commitment to a theory. It is always possible for us to have some irrational and groundless "sense of bafflement", believing that there is a problem when there is no more or none at all. *So* why don't we just put them aside?

My reply is that even if what has been said is true, it does not follow

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[48] *MQ*, xi, my emphasis.

that we should ignore our intuitive perception and that our intuitive uneasiness is impotent in justifying our doubt of ***S***. Though our intuitive perception of the existence of ***P*** may be misidentified and corrupted in the ways mentioned, it need not be, and any claim that it is *must be argued*. What does it mean? It means that Mr. O, in supporting ***S***, must show with further argument that it is *more reasonable* to believe ***S*** than our intuition. It implies precisely that a belief's being counter-intuitive provides reason for us to doubt it, and that our intuition cannot *simply* be ignored. Note that Nagel never means that it is a sufficient reason for us to reject ***S***. He maintains only that our intuitive perception is reliable so long as it is not shown to be irrational. Though the following passage is about ethical and political issue, it clearly reflects Nagel's general attitude toward our intuition as a watchman of beliefs:

> ...the use of moral intuition is inevitable, and should not be regretted. To trust our *intuitions*, particularly those that tell us something is wrong even though we don't know exactly what would be right, we need only believe that our moral understanding extends farther than our capacity to spell out the principles which underlie it. Intuition can be corrupted by custom, self-interest, or commitment to a theory, but it need not be, and often a person's intuition will provide him with evidence that his own moral theory is missing something, or that the arrangements he has been brought up to find natural are really unjust. Intuitive dissatisfaction is an essential resource in political theory. It can tell us that something is wrong, without necessarily telling us how to fix it.[49]

Certainly, our case will be much stronger if we can, in addition to pointing out that ***S*** is counter-intuitive, identify what is wrong with ***A***, and/or argue for a better formulation for ***P***. While our intuitive uneasiness gives us reason to doubt ***S***, it is in turns confirmed by our argument against ***S***.

Let us turn to our intuition as intuitive beliefs. Regarding our *revisable intuitive beliefs*, ***S*** is counter-intuitive if it is conflicting with our fundamental commonsensical beliefs that we take for granted pre-reflectively. Here, we should be very careful not to take Nagel as meaning that everything incompatible with our common sense can be automatically rejected, no matter how strong the supporting reason are. All he asserts is just that if ***S*** is

[49] *E&P*, p.7.

conflicting with our common sense, we have reason to doubt it. It is compatible with the claim that if we have sufficient reason, we can also reject and thus revise or even abandoned our accepted beliefs.

Mr. O may again challenge why we should take "being counter-intuitive" as a *reason* for doubting ***S***. Why should those beliefs that we take for granted pre-reflectively have such priority? Why don't we simply regard this as a neutral fact in the matter of justification? My reply, this time, is twofold. Firstly, it seems to be obvious that it is always rational to trust our accepted beliefs *if* there is no sufficient reason against them. Familiarity is always a reason, though not a sufficient one, for accepting a belief. Besides, our consideration of the acceptance and rejection of any belief in question must start *somewhere*, i.e. it must be done on the basis of what we already have. There can be no presuppositionless standpoint from which we can undertake our reflection, though it by no means implies that any of our presuppositions cannot be doubted, modified or even abandoned. Or, in Nagel's own words:

> Common sense doesn't have the last word in ethics or anywhere else, but it has...*the first word*: it should be examined before it is discarded.[50]

Finally, in the case of *unrevisable intuitive beliefs*, the claim of intuition is much stronger than the former two. ***S*** is counter-intuitive if it is incompatible with at least one of our unrevisable intuitive beliefs (let us call it ***U***) which is impossible, in the sense of being unintelligible, for us to doubt rationally. To be consistent, we have to choose between ***S*** and ***U***. Given the fact that it is always *possible* that ***A*** which supports ***S*** is unsound and the formulation of ***P*** is inappropriate, and it is *impossible* for us to deny ***U*** rationally, the most rational thing to do is to reject ***S*** as the appropriate solution to ***P***. In turn, we have sufficient reason to assume that either ***A*** is unsound or ***P*** is not formulated appropriately:

> Given a knockdown argument for an intuitively unacceptable conclusion, one should assume there is probably something wrong with the argument that one cannot detect - though it is also possible that the source of the intuition has been misidentified.[51]

Accordingly, we can consider our unrevisable intuitive beliefs as

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[50] *VFN*, p. 166.
[51] Preface, *MQ*, xi.

having both the first and, in some sense, the last word. On the one hand, they provide reasons for us to doubt ***S***, while, on the other, they are decisive in rejecting ***S***. Of course, we should not think that it is conflicting with the belief that reason has the last word in justification. Indeed, the former is implied by the latter: unrevisable intuitive beliefs are decisive in rejecting ***S*** because they cannot be doubted rationally, and it is the case only if the ultimate authority of reason is acknowledged.

I hope I have provided a plausible interpretation of and argument for Nagel's reliance on intuition in the above discussion. I have clarified Nagel's concept of intuition and showed how his intuitionism is not irrational as it appears to be. In fact, if my interpretation is correct, the trust of intuition — as intuitive perception, revisable and unrevisable intuitive beliefs — over any specific argument implying counter-intuitive conclusion manifests full commitment to the authority of reason.

Having said all these, it should be noted that it is just the beginning of the whole story. In arguing for the priority of intuition, I hope I have revealed the foundation of the Nagelian project. In the following chapters, I will argue for Nagel's particular version of reformulation of philosophical problems. I will discuss some unrevisable intuitive beliefs and explain how the central concepts of Nagel's theory are derived from them.

2

VIEWPOINTS

In the last chapter, we have discussed Nagel's conception of intuition and defended his trust in it. The argument, if successful, provides us with ground for doubting the plausibility of both the existing deflationary therapeutic dissolution and the reductionist solution of traditional philosophical problems. It in turn justifies the need for reformulation of those problems, since the best solutions to the problems *hitherto formulated* fails to do justice to the problems themselves. The question now is that: Which formulation should we adopt? Particularly, why should we accept *Nagel's version* of formulation — i.e. philosophical problems as the products of the conflict between the subjective and the objective points of view about the reality?

To answer this question, we must first have an idea of what he means by "points of view", "reality" and the distinction between "subjective" and "objective". In my opinion, Nagel's reformulation is grounded on his unique conception of viewpoint and reality. In this chapter, I will first discuss the nature of viewpoints and its role in Nagel's reformulation. I hope, in the course of discussion, to show that the existence of viewpoints is a fundamental fact about, not only human, but also *all reflective beings*. The discussion of his conception of reality and its relation with viewpoints will occupy the next chapter.

2.1 The Nature of Viewpoints

It is obvious that the concept of "viewpoint" is very important in the philosophy of Nagel. Almost all his work explores the conflict between the subjective and objective viewpoints, and he has much discussion about what is meant by a viewpoint's being subjective and objective. He, however, does not explain what a *viewpoint* is and of what it is constituted. Clearly, Nagel is

appealing to our everyday conception of "viewpoint". However, it is not clear what this everyday conception is, and so we must first take a closer look at it before we can have a thorough grasp of his formulation. In this section, I will concentrate on exploring the idea of "viewpoint". The discussion will centre on the questions of what a *viewpoint* is constituted, the role it plays, and what are counted as conflicting viewpoints.

Nagel employs different words — *perspective*, *standpoint* and *point of view* — to express the idea of "viewpoint". What do they mean? What do they refer to? Figuratively, both "viewpoint" and "standpoint" embody the idea of a *point*, a *position* occupied by something. It is a position from which something **X**[52] *views* the world. Since **X** views the world only from its viewpoint, what it can view is only what can be viewed from that viewpoint. Given that the world is not something that can be viewed only from one particular viewpoint, **X**'s position determines its *perspective*, from which only a certain *aspect* of the world can be viewed. From this preliminary sketch, we can see that there are two closely related features of a viewpoint. Firstly, it makes something's viewing the world possible. Whenever anything views the world, they must do so *from a certain position*. It is impossible for anything to view the world without occupying *any* position, or, in Nagel's term, it is impossible for anything to achieve *the view from nowhere*, since "it is impossible to leave one's own point of view behind entirely without ceasing to exist"[53].

Besides, it inevitably implies a limitation on what can be viewed. Now I am sitting in my study room. What I can see is the computer in front of me,

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[52] For the sake of convenience, I employ the following symbols to represent the basic elements involved in our conscious act of viewing throughout the essay:

X: a viewer (any being which is capable of viewing, i.e. perceiving and/or conceiving)

P: a viewpoint (a set of preconditions which enable X to view)
P*a*, P*b*, P*c*...: different viewpoints (different sets of preconditions for viewing)
P[0], P[1], P[2]...: different viewpoints with *different levels of objectivity* (the greater the number, the more objective a viewpoint is)

O: an object being viewed

VO: the view (i.e. perception and/or conception) of O formed by X from P/the appearance of O to X from P
VO*a*, VO*b*, VO*c*...: different views of O from different viewpoint P*a*, P*b*, P*c*...
VO[0], VO[1], VO[2]...: different views of O with *different levels of objectivity* (the greater the number, the more objective a view is)

[53] *VFN*, p. 67.

the table on which it is placed, several books and some stationery. I am shut out from the rest of the world. I have to leave the room if I want to see the things outside. Furthermore, though I can see my computer, what I can see is in fact only an aspect of it, namely the monitor screen. I cannot see its back, top or any other side of it and I have to change my relative position to it if I want to do so.

So far, what is said above is just figurative, taking "view" and "point" literally. Clearly, Nagel means not only "a position from which one sees" by "viewpoint". Indeed, he employs the term in a very broad sense. To understand what he means by it, we have to examine what he means by "viewing".

For Nagel, "viewing" refers to all activities of *perceiving* and *conceiving*. Perceiving refers to all the activities of direct awareness — seeing, hearing, tasting, sensing, feeling, etc, which are common in all conscious beings. Given an object **O** (which can either be a *thing*, an *issue*, or even *the world*), perceiving **O** means the direct awareness of **O**. Let us call the result of the act of perceiving, i.e. what is perceived, *perception*. The perception of **O** is then the way in which **O** is perceived. It need not involve any understanding. On the other hand, conceiving[54] is an act of understanding and apprehension that involves *concepts* and *beliefs*. Conceiving an object **O** means generating, upholding and developing beliefs about **O**. These beliefs may either be descriptive or evaluative. The act of conceiving usually involves perception — in fact, these beliefs are usually the product of the *interpretation* of perception. Let us call the result of the act of conceiving *conception*. Thus the conception of **O** is the set of beliefs about **O**[55]. Therefore, the *view* of **O**, the result of viewing **O**, is the perception and/or the conception of **O**. For the sake of simplicity, let us call any such view of **O** ***VO***.

Accordingly, a viewpoint **P** is the place *from which* **O** is perceived and conceived. However, it, like "viewing", should not be taken literally, in the

[54] By "conceiving", I do not mean "imagining" or "envisaging" in general. Instead, I mean the conscious activity of *conceptual* thinking and its resulting set of *beliefs*.
[55] In general, a conception is a set of *beliefs* concerning what there is and what one should do.

sense of physical location *only*. We should take it as referring to the totality of all the *subjective pre-conditions* — those that related to the viewer — that render any act of viewing (i.e. perceiving and conceiving) possible. Such pre-conditions include the viewer's physiological and psychological structure (and capacities), spatial location, socialisation, traditional and cultural influences, commonsensical beliefs and even personal experience, etc[56]. The specific content of these pre-conditions (i.e. *a particular type* of physiological structure, *a certain set* of traditional and cultural beliefs, etc.) *determines how* **O** *appears* — how it is perceived and conceived. In other words, *a viewpoint determines the content of* ***VO****, i.e. its corresponding view — perception and/or conception — of* ***O***.

What then is a *viewer*? Not everything in the world, as far as we know, is a viewer. Something **X** is a viewer if and only if it is capable of viewing the world. It is capable of viewing the world if and only if it has a viewpoint. What, then is essential involved in the fact that **X** has a viewpoint **P**? In one of his most celebrated article "What is it like to be a bat?" Nagel, appealing to our intuition, specifies the essential fact involved in the fact that an organism has conscious experience:

> ...fundamentally an organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something that it is like to *be* that organism — something it is like *for* the organism.[57]

Nagel calls this "the subjective character of experience". He does not provide an argument for it, but I think we can (and should) accept it on the ground that it is an unrevisable intuitive belief — belief that, once it is recognised, no alternative to it is intelligible. If there is nothing that it is like to be **X**, we cannot even form the thought that **X** is conscious. Conversely, granted that there is something it is like to be **X**, we cannot but agree that **X** is conscious,

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[56] These items are *pre*-conditions only in relation to a *particular* act of viewing a particular object (which can either be a thing or an issue) **O**. A particular belief is a pre-condition if and only if it is among those which are taken for granted in giving rise to **VO**. It may itself be a part of another conception which is the *result* of another set of pre-conditions, i.e. from another viewpoint. On the other hand, a newly acquired belief is always incorporated into the original set of pre-conditions for us to view other objects.

[57] "What is it like to be a bat?", in *MQ*, p.166.

no matter how its appearance, physiological and psychological structure are different from ours. To recognise this, we need only form the general conception that there is something it is like to be **X**, and we need not know what it is like to be **X** *at all*.

Here, Nagel is mainly concerned with perceptual experience, but the point can be generalised to cover all conscious phenomena. In arguing against physicalism, Nagel claims that it is impossible to exhaust all the phenomenological features (i.e. subjective mental phenomena) with a physical account alone, since

> ...every subjective phenomenon is essentially connected with a single point of view, and it seems inevitable that an objective, physical theory will abandon that point of view.[58]

In other words, in abandoning the particular viewpoint of **X**, a physicalist account is sure to miss the fact that there is something it is like to be **X**, which is essentially connected to the fact that **X** is conscious. Though what has perceptual experience must have a viewpoint, the latter is not the unique feature of the former. In my terminology, which is in accord with that of Nagel, viewing (i.e. perceiving and conceiving) covers all kinds of conscious states. It means that **X** is conscious if and only if **X** views. Since that **X** views implies that **X** has a viewpoint, it is simply unintelligible to say that **X** is conscious but it does not have any viewpoint. Therefore, we can generalise Nagel's talk of conscious perceptual experience to a specification of what X's having a viewpoint consists in:

***X** has a viewpoint if and only if there is something it is like for **X** to be **X**.*

Then, we can say that **X** has a viewpoint **Pa** means that for a given object **O**, **O** appears to **X** in a certain way **VOa** which is determined by the set of preconditions on the basis of which **X** perceive and/or conceive **O**. (It does not imply that there is not a way **O** is independently of **Pa**. Nor does it entail that **VOa** cannot reveal the independent nature of **O**.) With a different set of pre-conditions, *what it is like to be **X*** is in turn different. Accordingly, we can say that a viewer is a being *for* which there is something it is like to be it. A

viewpoint is a set of pre-conditions that determine how something appears to a viewer.

Two points should be noted. Firstly, we should not, at this stage, take it as meaning that a viewpoint determines the *nature* of **O**. What a viewpoint determines is merely a corresponding *perception* and/or *conception* of **O**, which may or may not reveal the real nature of **O**. Besides, in saying "a viewpoint determines the content of its corresponding view of **O**", I do not mean that any *one* of those pre-conditions is the *sufficient and necessary* condition for what we perceive or conceive of **O**. All I mean is just that: given a specific *set* of pre-conditions (i.e. from a particular viewpoint **Pa**), it, *as a whole*, is *sufficient* for our having a particular view of **O** (**VOa**). In other words, if any two individuals which perceive and/or conceive **O** from the *same* viewpoint, i.e. with the same set of pre-conditions, their perception and/or conception of **O** will be the same.

But what is meant by "the same viewpoint"? In a strict sense, two viewpoints are the same if and only if the sets of pre-conditions constituting them are the same; and two sets of pre-conditions are the same if and only if every single pre-condition of them is qualitatively identical. It is obvious that no two viewpoints can be the same in such a strict sense, which can easily be shown by fact that no two things can occupy the same space at the same time. However, it would be an oversimplification to claim that all viewpoints are different. To be more precise, we should specify clearly whether they are different *in the relevant aspect* and *how different* they are. In other words, though no two viewpoints are *exactly identical*, it is always possible that some of them are the same or similar to a certain extent *in some relevant aspects regarding particular issues*. Regarding a given object **O**, if two viewpoints **Pa** and **Pb** are the same, they will give rise to the *same view* of **O**, i.e. **VOa** and **VOb** are the same.

I have said that a viewpoint is the totality of all the pre-conditions *that render viewing possible and limit what can be viewed* (i.e. *what* things/issues can be viewed) *and what the view is* (i.e. *how* the thing/issues are viewed). It

[58] "What is it like to be a bat?", in *MQ*, p.167.

implies that a set of preconditions constitutes a viewpoint if and only if there is something — a *viewer* — which can *view a given object on the basis of them.* While a viewpoint determines what a view is, it also *defines* what the viewer **X** is, i.e. what **X** views *as*. Suppose we are discussing the problem of the existence of God **G**. When a person **X** holds the view that there is God (**VG[christian]**) on the ground that it is recorded in Bible (**P[christian]**), he makes his claim *as* a *Christian*(**X[christian]**). Assume that he is at the same time a physicist, and is asked to provide a scientific proof for the existence of God. If his mind is clear enough, that he should admit that *as a physicist* (**X[physicist]**) he cannot prove empirically that there is a God, in which he has absolute faith *as a Christian*. In other words, from the viewpoint of physics (**P[physicist]**), he should hold the view that there is no God (**VG[physicist]**). When he considers the issue **G** from two different viewpoints, **P[christian]** and **P[physicist]**, his views **VG[christian]** and **VG[physicist]** are not only different but also conflicting, in the sense that they cannot both be true. In viewing **G** from **P[christian]**, **X** is a Christian while, when he views from **P[physicist]**, he is a physicist. Of course, **X** is still the same person, but we can see that he views **G** *as two different individual* ***X[christian]*** *and* ***X[physicist]***. In this sense, we can say that what an individual is *can be* defined by the viewpoints from which it views[59].

Here, we have a special case of two conflicting views held by the same individual from two different viewpoints. However, we can generalize it to the formulation that regarding a given object **O**, an individual **X** holds two conflicting views if and only if:

① There is an individual **Xa** who views **O** from a viewpoint **Pa**.
② There is an individual **Xb** who views **O** from a viewpoint **Pb**.
③ The view **VOa**, which is determined by **Pa**, conflicts with **VOb**, which is determined by **Pb**; which means:
  ③' What is considered to be the case in **VOa** is considered *not* to be the case in **VOb**.
④ **Xa** and **Xb** is the same individual.

[59] Of course, there can be other different ways to define what an individual is.

It should be noted that what is stated above is a general formulation. It says nothing about *in what aspect* **Pa** is different from **Pb**. Particularly, it says nothing about whether the difference between **Pa** and **Pb** is that of *level of objectivity*, which is an instance of the general case. When Nagel says that philosophical problems have their deep source in our conflicting viewpoints, he refers to the special and not the general case. In what way, then, **Pa** and **Pb** are different in their level of objectivity? How should we understand the distinction between the subjective and the objective viewpoints? What is meant by "the objective view conflicts with the subjective view"?

2.2 The Subjective and the Objective Viewpoint

As I have mentioned in the Introduction, the chief contribution of Nagel lies in his effort in arguing for a unique version of reformulation of traditional philosophical problems. Roughly speaking, Nagel thinks that a human being **X** is capable of viewing and does view (i.e. perceive and conceive) an object **O** (a thing or an issue) from two different viewpoints **Pa** and **Pb** (i.e. with two different sets of pre-conditions) — the subjective and the objective. Since the set of pre-conditions on which **X** views **O** determine its view (perception and conception) of **O VO**, **Pa** and **Pb** give rise to two different views **VOa** and **VOb** respectively. The situation may be easier to handle if:

❶ Though **VOa** and **VOb** are different, they are compatible;

or ❷ Though they are incompatible, we have sufficient reason to consider one of them dominates the other;

or ❸ Though none of them win decisively, they are held by two different individuals and so they at worst remain silent and insist their own views without convincing the other.

Unfortunately, in many cases, especially in the case of philosophy, stalemate seems to be the fate. In most of the philosophical problems, the fact is usually that there are conflicting views generated by different viewpoints, "one point of view claims dominance over another, more subjective one, and that claim is resisted"[60]. Worse still, "the same individual is the occupant of both viewpoints"[61]. This conflict, according to Nagel, is the deepest source of the perplexities of all philosophical problems. The task of a philosopher, then, is "to juxtapose the internal and external or subjective and objective views at full strength, in order to achieve unification when it is possible and to recognize clearly when it is not"[62].

What is said above is at best a condensed statement of what Nagel has in mind. Much clarification and justification are needed. In the last section, we have discussed what a viewpoint and a view are, discovered that a being **X**'s having a viewpoint essentially involves the fact that there is something it is like for **X** to be **X**, and specified what **X** has two conflicting viewpoints means. We are now in a much better position to explore what Nagel takes to mean by the distinction of the subjective and the objective viewpoint. We have outlined Nagel's general formulation of traditional philosophical problems, but two important questions must first be answered before we can really understand and evaluate his conception of philosophy. Firstly, under what condition do we call a viewpoint *subjective* or *objective*? What is the respective nature of a subjective viewpoint and an objective viewpoint? Secondly, what is the nature of this distinction between subjective and objective? In this section, I will clarify this important distinction through answering these two questions in turn, while the questions of how the conflict between them generate philosophical problems and whether there is any possibility of reconciliation will only be dealt with in Chapter 4.

In our everyday life, we see, hear, sense and feel the world around us. Partly on the base of these perceptions and partly on the beliefs and values inherited from our families, societies and cultures, we form some beliefs and acts upon them. These beliefs are about what the world and we

[60] "Subjective and Objective", in *MQ*, p. 206.
[61] Ibid., p. 208.
[62] *VFN*, p. 4.

ourselves are, and what we and other people should do. We seldom doubt them if nothing goes wrong. It does not mean that we have strong reason to support our beliefs. Indeed, we always admit, at least implicitly, the possibility that our beliefs are false. We do not doubt them just because we do not even have the least thought about them at all; *we just take them for granted when we live our life*. We usually make our judgements and responses promptly and naturally. We do, of course, always think hard for some important questions in life. However, we just try to figure out what our decision should be according to and in harmony with what we have already taken for granted. To put it metaphorically, we always look *forward* in living our life, but we seldom look *back* to what we take for granted that give rise to what we see. We are not even aware of their existence.

One of the unique characteristics of we human beings is that we can and do sometimes look back. In the process of looking back, we discover that what we hold to be true may simply be the products of what we take for granted. We become suspicious about their claim to truth when we find that those beliefs from which they are derived are themselves problematic, not supported by sufficient reason, groundless or even irrational. It can be illustrated with the following examples.

1. One day, I bought my favourite chocolate ice-cream from a nearby supermarket. I took a bite of it as soon as I paid for it. To my disappointment, it was tasteless. Out of rage, I examined the ice-cream in detail and, to my surprise, it was of the right brand and the right favour. "What's wrong with it?" I wondered. I began to try to recall what I had done before I ate the ice-cream. After thinking hard for an hour (and the poor cone had, of course, melted already), I finally knew the truth. There was nothing wrong with my ice-cream at all. The fact was merely that I had eaten ten bars of Super chocolate just before I went to the supermarket. It was only a problem with my physiological condition — my taste. On further reflection, I came to realize that how the ice-cream tasted to me may not be solely determined by its properties; I seemed to have my contribution to it.

2. In the past, when I saw a beggar lying helplessly on the cold damp ground, I felt sorry for him, but did not consider myself to have any

responsibility for the situation. I thought it was just the necessary evil of the prosperity of the society. I did not question about the validity of my beliefs and thought that they were true for everyone. One day, I went to library and came across a book on communism. My first reaction after reading it was that it was ridiculous. How could our society as a whole be unjust[63]? I wondered why the communists would have such strange thought and tried to examine what beliefs they had and why they endorsed them. During the process, I left my viewpoint for the moment and tried to understand the communists *from their point of view*. I was not able to understand them perfectly, but there was always improvement. In recognizing that their beliefs presupposed other more firmly held beliefs and primary values, I was easy to recognize that my own beliefs did also have some presuppositions of which I had not been aware before. Once this thought emerged, I could not but doubt if my beliefs, which I had taken for granted before, were only rational for me, or our culture, while those of the others, which had been considered by me to be irrational or false, might be rational or true.

The above examples show that under certain circumstances — says our encounter with other systems of beliefs, the emergency of problems that the existing method or system of beliefs fails to react effectively, or just curiosity sparkled occasionally — we question the validity of our existing view and wonder "Is it really the case?" Once we turn our attention to these beliefs, we naturally want to find out what they exactly are and whether they are held legitimately. We want to make sure that they are not acquired through some irrational means, or if they really are, we can at least justify our continuous endorsement. It seems impossible for us to endorse a certain belief while at the same time believing that our endorsement is irrational and illegitimate. To ensure that what our view of a certain object is not just some illusion, we try to find out how we get this view and whether we are justified in holding it. It inevitably, provided that we drill deep enough, leads us to *step back* and *look back* on, to examine our fundamental beliefs, our *intuitions* (in the sense of revisable intuitive beliefs) and other pre-conditions (says our physiological and psychological structure) on which our particular view

[63] Of course, there are different versions of communism, but let us leave the question for the sake of

depends. It may turn out that some [or even most] of our former beliefs are illusory and do not, as they claim to be, represent what is the case. Some of them need to be revised and some may even be abandoned. The result of this deliberation will definitely change the view being considered. Either the *content* of our view will be changed (which involves the re-assignment of the true value of our beliefs, and/or the enrichment of our existing concepts, and/or the generation of new concepts), or the content remains the same but our *attitude* toward it alters as a result of a better understanding of it. The present view claims to represent reality, replacing the previous one that is now discarded as depicting only an appearance to us. Certainly, the process of re-examination can go on without an obvious limit, and better views, in the sense that they are truer, more capable in telling us what the world *really* is and what we should *really* do, will be generated and, hopefully, *the* true view can be achieved.

What is said above can be seen as an abridged, made-simple version of Nagel's conception of subjectivity and objectivity. In what follows, I will attempt a detailed explication of it in the light of the above picture and what we have established with regard to his conception viewpoint in general. Above all, I hope to show, in the course of our discussion, that the pursuit of objectivity is a fundamental, in the sense of being *constitutive*, feature of all reflective beings.

A viewpoint **P[n]** is the set of pre-conditions that enable a viewer **X** to view — perceive and/or conceive — a certain object **O** such that there is something it is like for **X** to be **X**. In other words, **O** appears to **X** in a specific way determined by **P[n]**. How **O** appears to **X** constitutes **X**'s view **V** (the perception and/or conception) of **O** — ***VO[n]***. Usually, what we are directly aware of is merely **VO[n]** but not **P[n]** in our everyday life. We do not normally look back on the pre-conditions that determine our view. Let us call **X**'s *looking back*, i.e. the attempt of revealing, clarifying, explicating and justifying, on its viewpoint **P[n]** which determines a specific view **VO[n]**, *reflection*[64]. The ***n*** attached to **P** and **VO** can be substituted by 0 and any

argument.

[64] Here, the term "reflection" is employed in a rather strict sense, limiting only to the deliberation that takes one's current view *and* its corresponding viewpoint as its objects. In this sense, the calculation of

positive integer, representing the *level of reflection*. **VO[0]** represents the primordial view of **X** on the *pre-reflective* level, i.e. the view before any reflection takes place. **P[0]**, accordingly, represents the pre-conditions which determines one's pre-reflective view of the object **VO[0]**. On this level, **VO[0]** appears to represent what **O** really is, and no consideration of **P[0]** is made.

Two very important points should be noted. On the one hand, there is not any implication on the substantial content of **VO[0]**. That a specific perception and conception is the pre-reflective view of **X** implies nothing about what its content is, i.e. how **O** appears to **X**. For different viewers, their starting points are individual and hence the specific content of their views varies. An Aborigine in Africa who thinks there are gods in all trees and animals has a different pre-reflective view from that of a Chinese scientist. The picture of the world which people in the pre-Newtonian era endorsed pre-reflectively is to a large extent different from that of any modern man who accepts the theory of relativity and quantum mechanics. However, whether a view is pre-reflective is not determined by its content, but by the fact that it is the view of a particular individual *before he reflects upon it*.

On the other hand, whether a view is pre-reflective must be determined reflectively, i.e. from a reflective point of view. The revelation that **VO[0]** is determined by **P[0]**, that **O** appears to **X** in such a way because **X** views **O** from **P[0],** is itself *the product of **X**'s reflection*. In other words, it is also a view of **X**, which presupposes another viewpoint. It is from this new, reflective viewpoint that **X** comes to know how the former view **VO[0]** is derived from its corresponding viewpoint **P[0]**. Let us call this new, reflective viewpoint **P[1]**, indicating that it is the viewpoint which facilitates its first-level reflection (i.e. the reflection upon its pre-reflective view), and its corresponding view (that **VO[0]** is the product of **P[0]**) **VO[1]**. **P[0]**, **VO[0]** and their relation become the content of **VO[1]**. As soon as we get here, we, interestingly enough, have already formed a new view on a even more reflective level **VO[2]**, which is constituted by our awareness and apprehension of the respective nature and relation between **P[1]** and **VO[1]**.

Before its reflection, **X** takes **VO[0]** as representing what **O** really is, or

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the sum 23 + 12 = ? *is not* reflection, while thinking about what a sum is, how the sign "+" operates

the *reality* of **O**. Holding **VO[1]**, **X** learns that **VO[0]** is the product of **P[0]**. Though it does not directly entail that **VO[0]** is *merely* the product of **P[0]** and no more, revealing nothing about what **O** is *in itself*, it leaves room for the *possibility* that **VO[0]** represents *only* how **O** *appears* to us from **P[0]**. It is possible that **VO[0]** is just valid for **X**. Another reflective being which is different from **X** may view **O** differently. In order to ensure that its view is true, **X** must try to understand the preconditions on which its view is based. On the one hand, it tries to minimize the possible "distortion" due to its specific physiological and psychological constitution. On the other hand, it must examine the given set of primary beliefs which it inherits from its specific culture, and sees whether any of them are problematic and need to be revised or, when necessary, abandoned. As a result, **X** is supposed to get a *truer* view of **O** after subtracting those specific elements.

According to Nagel, this advancement in the level of reflection is in fact advancement in the level of *objectivity*[65]. It means that **VO[1]**, apart from being of a higher level of reflection, is more *objective* than **VO[0]**. **P[1]**, then, is a more *objective viewpoint* in relation to **P[0]**. How is that so? In what way is a more reflective viewpoint more objective? What exactly is meant by "objective"? Nagel writes:

> An advance in objectivity requires that already existing forms of understanding should themselves become the objects of a new form of understanding, which also takes in the objects of the original forms. This is true of any objective step, even if it does not reach the more ambitious goal of explaining itself. All advances in objectivity subsume our former understanding under a new account of our mental relation to the world.[66]

As we have seen, our reflection presses us to question whether what we take to be true is just true for us, and we do not want it to be the case. We want to take a certain view as true because it represents what is the case (whatever it means) independent of my believing it. To achieve this, we must show that our pre-reflective view **VO[0]** is not just true for us. We must show

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and how it is possible for us to engage in calculation *is*.

[65] In this chapter, we only concern about objectivity and subjectivity of views and viewpoints. How they are applied to reality will be discussed in Chapter 3.

[66] *VFN*, P. 75.

that **VO[0]** is true for all other reflective beings because it represents the real nature of **O**. We must show that though **VO[0]** is obtained through **PO[0]**, it is not just an elaboration of and is not "corrupted" or "contaminated" by **PO[0]**. We do this by stepping back and examining both **VO[0]** and **PO[0]**, and during the examination, we justify **VO[0]** as far as possible and, when necessary, correct any possible distorted elements in it:

> It is recognized that one's own point of view can be distorted as a result of contingencies of one's makeup or situation. To compensate for these distortions it is necessary either to reduce dependence on those forms of perception of judgement in which they are most marked, or to analyze the mechanisms of distortion and discount for them explicitly.[67]

The revised view **VO[1]** is thus less determined by our particularity than **VO[0]**. Of course, **VO[1]** itself is still derived from something particular to us — **PO[1]**, and so the possibility of distortion is always there and further reflection is needed. The ideal aim is to achieve an undistorted view of **O** — a view that is not merely internal to our particular viewpoint and that is to be achieved by detaching as far as possible from our particularity. This "externality" or "detachment", according to Nagel, is the essential character of objectivity:

> ...Its essential character, in all the examples cited, is externality or detachment. The attempt is made to view the world not from a place within it, or from nowhere in particular and no form of life in particular at all. The object is to discount for the features of our pre-reflective outlook that make things appear to us as they do, and thereby to reach an understanding of things as they really are. We flee the subjective under the pressure of an assumption that everything must be something not to any point of view, but in itself. To grasp this by detaching more and more form our own point of view is the unreachable ideal at which the pursuit of objectivity aims.[68]

We can observe a special characteristic of our pursuit of objectivity.

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[67] "Subjective and Objective", in *MQ*, p. 208.

[68] Ibid., p. 208.

Objectivity, according to Nagel, is basically "a method of understanding"[69]. The pursuit of objectivity is driven by our desire to *understand* the ways the world and we ourselves are and what we should do independent of any particular viewpoint. Once we recognize the possibility of the falsity of our beliefs, we, as long as we are rational reflective beings, cannot but try to search for a view that can better represent the reality. Throughout the process of reflection, we form more and more objective views **VO[2]**, **VO[3]**, **VO[4]** and so on. The aim is to form "the view from nowhere", a view from no particular viewpoint. It is only an unattainable ideal that provides the direction for our pursuit since, as we have mentioned, nothing can view without any pre-conditions.

Only against the background of this process of objective advancement can we understand what *subjectivity* is. From the above discussion, we can see the relative character of objectivity. It does not make sense to ask whether a particular view **VOa**, with all its content known, is objective *in itself*. A view is objective *only* in relation to another with which it is compared:

> A view or form of thought is more objective than another if it relies less on the specifics of the individual's makeup and position in the world, or on the character of the particular type of creature he is. [70]

Similarly, we can say that a view or a viewpoint is more *subjective* than another if it relies *more* on the specifics of the individual's makeup and position in the world, or on the character of the particular type of creature he is. **VO[1]** (and **P[1]**), then, is more subjective in relation to **VO[2]** (**P[2]**); it is more subjective in that it is to a greater extent derived from and determined by the particularity of **X**. It is, however, compatible with the fact that **VO[1]** (**P[1]**) is more objective than **VO[0]** (**P[0]**).

Objectivity, in this sense, can be understood as a process of transcendence of one's own previous views and viewpoints. However, we should be careful not to confuse it with *subjective transcendence*.

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[69] *VFN*, p. 4.

> It must be distinguished from a different kind of transcendence by which one enters imaginatively into other subjective points of view, and tries to see how things appear from other specific standpoints. Objective transcendence aims at a representation of what is external to each specific point of view: what is there or what is of value in itself, rather than *for* anyone.[71]

Here, Nagel is contrasting objectivity with another method of understanding. Besides being an attribute of views and viewpoints, subjectivity, like objectivity, can also be understood as a method of understanding. If we want to understand the objective nature of an external object, the best way is to try to form a more detached — not only from my viewpoint but also as many as possible — view. The more detached our view is, the more accurate it represents the real nature of the object. However, sometimes the object of understanding is of a different nature. If we want to understand how a piece of beef tastes to a sheep (which won't probably enjoy it), we must try to leave our own human point of view and *imagine* from the viewpoint of a sheep as far as possible. Generally speaking, in understanding appearance, what we can get from detachment is simply not what we want. Instead, we should employ a different method in a totally opposite direction, i.e. subjective *imagination.* According to it, we should try our best to engage in the particular viewpoint involved — identify all the preconditions of the viewer and think and *imagine with* them. Only through this method can we make sense of views alien to ours.

We should be vigilant that objectivity is not and cannot be reduced to *intersubjectivity*. It may be true that a more objective viewpoint should be accessible to more different sorts of viewers than a relatively more subjective one since it relies less on the particularity of its viewer. However, it does not mean that an objective viewpoint is constituted of what are common to most of the more subjective viewpoints. An objective viewpoint is not obtained by taking common factors among different subjective viewpoints:

> ...the transition to a more objective viewpoint is not accomplished merely through intersubjective agreement. Nor

[70] Ibid., p. 5.
[71] "Subjective and Objective, in *MQ*, p. 209.

> does it proceed by an increase of imaginative scope that provides access to many subjective points of view other than one's own. Its essential character, in all the examples cited, is externality or detachment.[72]

It is possible that an comparatively more objective view **VO[9]** (of a viewer **Xa**) may not be accessible to some beings **Xb** which, because of their constitution, are only capable of viewing the world from **P[4]** (of **Xa**). It is possible that **Xa** does not possess any essential elements constituting **P[9]**.

Besides being relative, the distinction between subjective and objective is not all-or-nothing, but, in Nagel's term, a "polarity":

> At one end is the point of view of a particular individual, having a specific constitution, situation, and relation to the rest of the world. From here the direction of movement toward greater objectivity involves, first, abstraction from the individual's specific spatial, temporal, and personal position in the world, then from the features that distinguish him form other humans, then gradually from the forms of perception and action characteristic of humans, and away from the narrow range of a human scale in space, time, and quantity, toward a conception of the world which as far as possible is not the view from anywhere within it. There is probably no end-point to this process, but its aim is to regard the world as centerless, with the viewer as just one of its contents.[73]

In other words, the distinction is really "a matter of degree". **V[1]** is more objective than **V[0]**, but **V[2]** is even more objective than **V[1]**. It follows that a view can be objective without being completely detached from any particularity of the viewer. Only absolute objectivity, i.e. the view from nowhere, requires complete detachment.

If we understand this, we can see why a certain form of argument against the pursuit of objectivity misses the point. In his paper "Solidarity or Objectivity?"[74], Richard Rorty urges us to abandon the pursuit of objectivity and be content with an ethnocentric solidarity internal to a given community of

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[72] "Subjective and Objective", in *MQ* , p. 208.

[73] "Subjective and objective", in *MQ*, p. 206.

[74] Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?" in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p.21-34.

a particular culture. His central claim is that for a Realist, one who engages in the pursuit of objectivity, the whole point of philosophical thought is to detach oneself from any particular community and look down at it from a ahistorical, transcultural and universal viewpoint. However, since we are people of a particular historical epoch and culture, and our reflection must be based on what we have inherited, there is no such universal viewpoint which is detached from all cultural and historical contingencies. Therefore, we are condemned to be ethnocentric and should content with achieving solidarity within our ethnos.

The argument would be sound only if we take the distinction between subjective and objective as an either-or dichotomy. Assume that we cannot occupy an absolutely universal viewpoint on the obvious ground that we cannot in fact escape our contingencies completely. What does it entail? It at most entails that we cannot occupy an absolutely objective viewpoint. However, as we have seen, "subjective" and "objective" are relative concepts, and they are not all-or-nothing but admit of degree. Accordingly, the pursuit of objectivity does not require the possibility of achieving absolute detachment. It requires only that we can take a more detached viewpoint with respect to where we viewed the world before. Unless it is shown that we can never detach from our former viewpoint, or that a clear limit of such detachment can be set, it is groundless to disprove the pursuit of objectivity. To say that we should not pursue objectivity since we can never pursue absolute objectivity is as absurd as saying that we should abandon our goal of getting a higher mark in the examination since we cannot get the highest mark.

To close this section, let me emphasize two special and original features of Nagel's conception of objectivity that we should always bear in mind. Firstly, Nagel only gives a *formal* characterization of what objectivity *per se* is. All that he specifies is just the *essential character* of objectivity, i.e. detachment (or externality). A viewpoint **Pa** is more objective than another **Pb** if and only if it is more detached, i.e. relies less on the particularity of its corresponding viewer. There is no *a priori* limitation on the substantial content of objectivity. Specifically, there need not be just *one* kind of objectivity, physical or whatever. Nagel's characterization leaves much room for different

interpretation of objectivity with regard to different realms of enquiry. Both our enquiries of what the world is and what we should do should be in some sense objective, but they need not require the same kind of objectivity. It is exactly one of Nagel contributions that he tries his very best to explore the different possibilities of interpretation of objectivity that are appropriate to every specific subject.

Secondly, Nagel is correct in reminding us that though objectivity is basically *a* method of understanding, that our pursuit of objectivity is primarily driven by our desire of understanding, there is no guarantee that an objective understanding is always *the* best method of understanding everything in the world. On the one hand, some portions of reality may be essentially subjective and thus any objective understanding of them is inappropriate and condemned to distorting their real nature. On the other hand, there are probably an unimaginably huge amount of things in the world that cannot be fully understood even from the most objective viewpoint we can ever occupy, given the finitude of human beings. It can even be acknowledged from our objective viewpoint. These will be further elaborated and justified in Chapter 3.

2.3 The Existence of the Two Viewpoints as a Constitutive Fact of Reflective Human Beings

So far we have examined what a viewpoint is and what is meant by the distinction of the subjective and the objective viewpoint. In this section, I will try to show that the existence of our capability of viewpoint the same object from viewpoints of different levels of objectivity is a constitutive fact of reflective human beings.

It is quite obvious that we reflective human beings are capable of viewing the world and our life from both a more personal, subjective and a

relatively more objective viewpoints, and conflicting views are always resulted. On the one hand, it is simply undeniable that in our everyday life, everything in the world, including ourselves, appears to us in one way or other. A conscious being must have a viewpoint, and there must be something it is like to be it. In other words, every conscious being must at least have a certain pre-reflective view, even if it may contain just some perception. Otherwise, it can be in no way counted as conscious at all. Even a bat, in this sense, has a view. If we admit that we are conscious being, we must also admit that we are capable of viewing the world.

Besides, it also seems to be an intuitive fact that we can and do view our current view from a more objective viewpoint. Although most of the animals, while being conscious, cannot (as far as we know) form beliefs and hence cannot reflect upon their own views, we human beings can. We sometimes wonder whether what we believe is true and what we do is right, and we reflect upon them. Can we doubt rationally whether a reflective being can occupy a more objective viewpoint[75]? Suppose I hold the view that

> **(a)** All reflective beings can step back to examine the view and their corresponding viewpoint they currently hold from a more objective viewpoint.

and give my argument for it, and you doubt it. What is necessary in order that your doubt is intelligible and not merely an utterance formed by adding the phrase "I doubt that" before **(a)**? Of course, you cannot doubt anything rationally without given any reason for it, so you have to make your argument. What kind of reason will you give? You must give an explanation of what is wrong with my view. You must at the very least show that I have made some logical mistakes in my deduction or that I have misunderstood or confused some of the key terms. In other words, you must show that **(a)**, which is from your viewpoint either false or non-sensible, *appears* to me to be true *only because* I hold a particular set of beliefs, some of which are false or non-sensible. Your view is better in that it does not commit to the same mistakes

[75] By "an objective viewpoint", I do mean "the absolutely objective viewpoint". It is clear that not all reflective beings can view from the absolutely objective viewpoint, since *nothing* can view from such a viewpoint to form the "view from nowhere".

I have made. Besides, your reason cannot be just "since I believe it so". If you really want to convince anybody, your claim cannot be just true to you; it cannot merely be a product of your point of view. It follows that your doubt, if it is rational, must be made from a more *detached* viewpoint than mine and your own personal one, taking both of them as the objects of understanding. What else can it be but an objective viewpoint? If your doubt is rational at all, it must be made from a more objective viewpoint. Therefore, the fact that you can doubt **(a)** presupposes that, at the very least, you yourself are a reflective being which can view from an objective viewpoint.

What does it mean? It means that you must show that there are some reflective beings that are so different from you that they are reflective but cannot occupy an objective viewpoint. In other words, you must show that there is at least one being which can engage in what you are doing, i.e. reflecting upon his own view or those of others, but cannot do so from a more objective viewpoint. Can anyone provide any argument for that? I think not, since any reflection, as your doubt about **(a)**, is necessarily performed from an objective viewpoint. To sum up, all reflective beings are capable of viewing the world and reflecting upon this view and its corresponding viewpoint from a more detached viewpoint. In this sense, a being is a reflective being only if it can view a given object from both a subjective and an objective viewpoint. It follows that the capability of viewing the same object from both a subjective and an objective viewpoint is the fundamental feature of all reflective beings; this capability is a *constitutive fact* of all reflective beings, including most human beings.

In this chapter, we have seen how Nagel establishes his conception of viewpoint in terms of the subjective-objective distinction. In the following chapter, I will examine how the distinction is applied to another pillar of the Nagelian project — reality. With a proper understanding of Nagel's conception of the subjective-objective distinction regarding both viewpoint and reality, we can in a better position to understand the real nature of the conflict between the subjective and the objective view, why the conflict is so intractable and hence appreciate the contribution of Nagel.

3

REALITY

The ultimate end of the intellectual activities of human beings is to find out what the reality is. Here, reality is employed in the broadest sense possible, referring to *all that is really the case*. Questions about reality can be roughly classified into two groups: what there *really is* and what we *really should do*. Pre-reflectively, we have some views about the world and our life, which are specific to our pre-reflective viewpoint. Under certain circumstances, especially when we discover problems with our pre-reflective views, we may question our beliefs of what there is and what we should do. To make sure that what we believe represents what is really the case, we examine the view and the particular viewpoint presupposed by it. According to Nagel, our transcendence to a more objective viewpoint is driven by our impulse to *understand reality*, i.e. to understand whether our view formerly held represents what the world really is and what we should really do. Nevertheless, it may not always be the case that what is real equals to what is obtained from the most objective point of view; some portion of reality may be intrinsically subjective and can only be understood from a more subjective viewpoint. This produces a tension between the two views, which is underlined by our natural inclination of obtaining a unified conception of reality. As a result, our pursuit of "a highly unified conception of life and the world always leads to philosophical mistakes—to false reductions or to the refusal to recognize part of what is real"[76].

We have already seen that Nagel thinks the source of philosophical perplexities is the conflict between the subjective and the objective viewpoint. Why is such conflict so important? Why can't we just put them aside, or taking either of them as the correct view? The answer Nagel provides can be

[76] *VFN*, p. 3.

stated briefly as follows. We can understand the world or our life only by having a view of them. Though one's view is determined by the particularity of the viewpoint, it is always a view of *what is really the case*. Since both objective detachment and subjective imagination are only methods of understanding reality, there is no guarantee that either of them alone is adequate or appropriate for us to conceive and understand all that is real. It may be that parts of reality can be best understood from the most objective viewpoint, while others can only be comprehended from subjective perspectives of different degree. Still, due to our specific constitution — physical, psychological and cultural — there is probably a very large portion of reality that is not even conceivable to *us*. All that is said above amounts to saying that there are *different kinds of reality*. "What is really the case" admits different interpretations. **X** and **Y** can both be real without being *real in the same way*. Only against this conception of reality can we understand why the conflict between the two views are so difficult to resolve and yet disposable, and why we cannot just get rid of them.

In this chapter, we will examine Nagel's conception of reality. It will be divided into four sections. In section 3.1, we will discuss Nagel's unique interpretation of "reality". Then, we will examine how he justifies the intelligibility of the idea of subjective and objective reality against some counter-argument in section 3.2 and 3.3. Finally, in section 3.4, we will discuss the inescapability of the two ideas. Together they will path the way for our discussion on the nature of the conflict between the subjective and the objective viewpoint.

3.1 Reconsidering Reality

In this section, I will examine Nagel's conception of reality. I will analyse his concept of reality and show what his realism claims and how it leaves room for the objective and subjective reality.

3.11 Realism, Pan-objectivism and Pan-subjectivism

Contemporary philosophical discussion about reality focuses on the fundamental question concerning *the criteria of reality*, i.e. how something can be said to be real. According to Nagel, there are mainly two attitudes or approaches which attempt to put an end to the enquiry: scientism and idealism. While the former claims to *have solved* the problem, the latter maintains that there is in fact no real problem to solve, i.e. the ontological problem is simply *dissolved*.

Scientism is the approach that claims to have *solved* the problem by providing a theory for what there is. It asserts that reality is just scientific — ultimately physical — reality, and anything that cannot be discovered and understood through our method of empirical science does not exist. Regarding any object **O**, scientism proposes the criteria that **O** is real only if it is understandable with scientific concepts, theories and methods. In its most extreme version like logical positivism, it maintains that all talks about empirically unobservable entities and facts are simply nonsensical. In a word, as Nagel writes:

> ...[scientism] assumes that everything there is must be understandable by the employment of scientific theories like those we have developed to date — physics and evolutionary biology are the current paradigms — as if the present age were not just another in the series.[77]

On the other hand, idealism is roughly the approach according to which "what there is and how things are cannot go beyond what we could in principle think about."[78] To put it formally, an idealist claims that **O** is real *only if it is conceivable to human thought*. If an ontological discussion aims at discovering the fundamental nature and structure of reality that is independent of any human form of perception and cognition, the idealist approach tells us

[77] *VFN*, p. 9.
[78] Ibid.

that there is no point of doing so because "the idea of something that we could not think about or conceive of makes no sense"[79]. Once we have a proper appreciation of the condition of thought, we will see that we simply cannot think intelligibly about an independent reality. All we can get is *just* a more refined description of *a world for us*.

Nagel explicitly writes against these two attitudes in *The View From Nowhere*.[80] While scientism (regarding its content alone) rejects the reality of the subjective realm and/or reduces it to objective reality, idealism denounced the very idea of viewpoint-independent objective reality as meaningless. Since scientism is only one form of expression of a more general impulse, and "idealism" is rather confusing due to its ambiguous usage throughout the history of philosophy, I want to introduce the terms *Pan-objectivism* and *Pan-subjectivism* for the sake of our discussion. By Pan-objectivism, I refer to the attitude that everything real is ultimately objective, i.e. not related to any viewpoint. According to it, reality is just objective reality, and what is subjective is merely appearance and thus cannot be real. Scientism, in a sense, is a specific version of it, which interprets objectivity as merely *physical objectivity*. Pan-objectivism need not take this form, and can admit that there are other forms of objectivity, but it does maintain that what is real and what is essentially subjective are mutually exclusive. In Nagel's words, Pan-objectivism represents the fundamental belief of people "who believe it [objectivity] can provide a complete view of the world on its own, replacing the subjective views from which it has developed"[81]. On the other hand, I call the contrary attitude Pan-subjectivism[82]. According to it, everything real is ultimately subjective — i.e. things can be intelligibly said to be real only if they are viewable (perceivable and/or conceivable) to *us*[83]. Any talk about

[79] Ibid., p. 90.
[80] See the Introduction of *VFN*.
[81] *VFN*, p.5
[82] The distinction between Pan-objectivism and Pan-subjectivism is only roughly drawn, putting aside details of the sophisticated relation between the two. For example, it is possible that Pan-objectivism can be in some sense interpreted as a special form of Pan-subjectivism, as what Nagel has done to scientism, and the content of the former may resist such assimilation. However, for the sake of discussion, let us first put this question aside, and consider them to be contrary to each other, i.e. they can both be false but cannot both be true.
[83] In this sense, we can say that although scientism claims to represent the independent reality, it is just "a special form idealism, for it puts one type of human understanding in charge of the universe and what can be said about". Therefore, in attacking scientism, Nagel always takes it as a particular version

viewpoint-independent reality is either referring to a viewpoint implicitly or simply meaningless. In other words, Pan-subjectivists "don't regard it [objectivity] as a method of understanding the world as it is in itself"[84]. According to Nagel, objectivity as method of understanding is overrated by the former and underrated by the latter, and both of them "stem from an insufficiently robust sense of reality and of its independence of any particular form of human understanding."[85] As opposing to them, Nagel's realism asserts both the objective and the subjective reality. The price for this realist attitude is the uneasy admittance of the existence of facts which are inaccessible in a strong sense, i.e. inconceivable in principle, to us human beings. Accordingly, both the Pan-objectivist and the Pan-subjectivist approaches, claiming to cover all that is real, are wrong in cutting the universe down to size.

We should remember that, all Pan-objectivism, Pan-subjectivism and realism, are only *general attitudes* of conceiving reality; they only represent what one takes reality ultimately to be — which (all, some or no) part of reality is mind-dependent or mind-independent. They in themselves do not imply any specific limitation on the substantial content of what reality *consists of*. Being a realist, one can endorse a monist, dualist or pluralist position, and believe either everything is material or there are minds in addition to physical objects. Similarly, a Pan-objectivist can be a physicalist, functionalist or eliminative materialist, while a Pan-subjectivist can hold either that only what is physical exists (i.e. scientism), or that everything, from a tree to a university, is *just* cultural and social construction.

3.12 Reality and Appearance

To defend Nagel's realist position, we must first clarify what he means by reality. We can do so by answering the question: What is the relation between reality and appearance? On the one hand, Nagel contrasts *reality*

of idealism.

[84] *VFN*, p. 5.

with *appearance*, as he writes on the issues of personal identity:

> There must be a notion of objectivity which applies to the self, to phenomenological qualities, and to other mental categories, for it is clear that the idea of a mistake with regard to my own personal identity, or with regard to the phenomenological quality of an experience, makes sense...*there is a distinction between appearance and reality in this domain as elsewhere* [my emphasis].[86]

It means that reality is different from appearance. What is real must *be in some sense objective*, and cannot be *merely* what appears to a particular viewpoint (or viewpoints). It seems to imply that what is real is not appearance, and what is regarded as appearance cannot be real. On the other hand, Nagel clearly holds that "[a]ppearance and perspective are essential parts of what there is"[87]. How can we reconcile these two views?

According to our common usage, an appearance is usually an appearance *of* an object **O** *to* a viewer **X**, who views from a certain viewpoint — a set of pre-conditions for viewing **O**. It is, conceived from the side of the object, the way in which **O** *appears* — is revealed — to **X**. In fact, if we speak from the side of the viewer, the appearance of **O** to **X** is what **X** obtains when it views (perceives and/or conceives) **O**, i.e. **X**'s view of **O VO** (see chapter 2). Two points should be noted here. On the one hand, the talk of appearance is intelligible only in relation *to a viewer*. There can be appearance only if there is a viewer to which **O** appears. If there is no viewer or no conscious being at all, there can be no appearance. The existence of the appearance of **O** to **X** consists in what it is like for **X** to view **O**.

On the other hand, there is no *a priori* limit on the nature of **O**. That is, the notion of "the appearance of **O**" in no way implies what **O** is. It only implies that something is perceived and/or conceived in a certain way by a viewer. The meaning of this is threefold. Firstly, **O** need not be a *physical*

[85] *Ibid.*.
[86] *VFN*, p. 36.
[87] *VFN*, p. 4. It will be further discussed in the next section.

entity, or something external to **X**. The "something" that is viewed may be a fact, a value or even a theory, unless there is an argument showing that it cannot be. Secondly, **O** *itself* can also be an appearance. In this case, the viewer is not viewing something other than that which is represented by the particular appearance. Consider the case of pain. A pain is essentially a pain appearing *to* a conscious being. It is, however, not an appearance *of* something else. Pain is just the sensation of pain, the appearance itself. What a pain is is exactly how it appears to a viewer, i.e. how the viewer senses it. According to Nagel, this is true of all kinds of sensation:

> In the case of sensation, the reality is itself a form of appearance, and the distinction one between real appearance and apparent appearance...Similarity or difference of sensations is similarity or difference of sensory appearances, not of something else that appears.[88]

Thirdly, the fact that **VO** is the appearance of **O** to **X** does not imply that it cannot also *represent* what **O** is in itself. It is true that the substantial content of **VO** is determined by the viewpoint of **X**, but it is not obvious that the former is *solely* determined by the latter, i.e. **VO** can be nothing but how **O** appears to **X**. **VO** always claims to represent what is really the case about **O** in intent. Though it is false that all different (and even conflicting) views of **O** of different viewers represent how **O** is independent of its being viewed, it is always reasonable to assume that some are (or at least one is), unless it is shown that such assumption is wrong or does not make sense.

If an appearance is essentially related to a viewpoint, reality can then be understood as what is *independent* of any viewpoint. What is real is not just what is the case from a particular viewpoint. Nor is the concept of reality exhausted by what is commonly agreed from all viewpoints. The reality of an object is the mode of its existence *in itself* and not from any viewpoint. However, if reality is independent of our viewpoint, and appearance is essentially related to it, how can appearance be part of reality? Are they not mutually exclusive? What is meant by saying that the reality of sensation

itself is a form of appearance?

When we talk about reality, we may take reality as referring to the aspect of an object that is *independent* of any viewpoint. Given an object **O**, we can describe its different aspects and properties. Consider the case of a stool. Suppose we describe it in the following way: it is brown in colour, with a square flat top, made of wood and with its specific function: for people to sit on. Although they are correct, these descriptions may be regarded as representing only how the particular object *appears to* us human beings with our specific viewpoint. The object *in itself*, i.e. as it is independent from *any* particular viewpoint, is different from how it appears. In *reality*, i.e. detached from and independent of any viewpoints, it is composed of numerous tiny particles and void. This can be conceived even by creatures that do not shared our viewpoint, while the former descriptions are meaningless for those intelligent beings which have neither vision nor hips by constitution. In this sense, we are indeed talking about the *objective reality*, i.e. the independent existence of the stool of any viewpoint. Since the stool is an objective entity in the external world, the objective reality of the stool equals to its reality. That means, while it *is in itself* made up of tiny particles, it only *appears* to us as having colours and with certain functions. These colours and functions as appearing to us are not the intrinsic properties of the stool, though the structural properties that give rise to them are[89]. When we consider external objects (things or facts), we always want to know what they are *as they are independent of any viewpoint*.

However, it does not imply that reality is exhausted by objective reality in all cases. Pre-reflectively, we all believe that there is an external world that exists even if there is nothing to think about it. The world is an objective world in the sense that it does not depend on any conscious beings in order to exist. However, when we take "the world" as the totality of all that is the case, all that is *real*, there is no reason to exclude the possibility of subjective reality in advance[90]. What is real need not be objective, i.e. independent of any

[88] *VFN*, p. 36.

[89] Of course, a stool is a stool only if it is understood within a socio-cultural context. In this example, however, the word "stool" is used only as *a name to fix the reference*, referring to *that* object.

[90] This is, of course, just one sense of "world". Phenomenologists, for example, take it to mean

viewpoint. There are things or facts that are so obvious to us that any denial of their reality seems to be incredible. On the one hand, it is an intuitively unrevisable fact that there are viewpoints in the world — otherwise, even the *thought* that the world is just an objective world is impossible — and they are of course not independent of viewpoint. On the other hand, although, as mentioned in the above example, the stool is not brown in itself, it is a fact that *it appears to me as brown*. The existence of appearance is as real as the fact that the stool is made up of particles, but it simply does not make sense to say that it is a fact independent of *any* viewpoint — since an appearance must be an appearance to a viewpoint. How, then can we say that it is also real?

Here, we should carefully distinguish between two senses of "an object's independence of any viewpoint"[91]. In a strict sense, we can take it to mean that the object in itself is *in no way related to* any viewpoint. Its existence does not require and is not determined by any viewpoint. It exists even if there is no viewpoint and viewing being in the world. Pre-reflectively, mountains, trees, rocks and all the non-conscious natural physical objects are independent of any viewpoint in this sense. On the other hand, in a relatively loose sense, we can also mean that *the existence* of the object itself *does not require any viewer to view it*. It may be related to a viewpoint in the way that the viewpoint is a constituent part of the object. Consider the case of "seeing a patch of red". As a conscious activity, it *essentially* related to the viewer who sees this patch of red. Without any viewpoint, there can be no possible sense we can make of this description. The existence of this activity, however, does not require any further viewpoint to which it appears. Even if there is nothing in this world viewing the fact that the viewer sees a patch of red, the fact is real nonetheless, provided that *that viewer* exists. Though it is not *objectively real*, unless we assume that what is real must be objective, it seems artificial and groundless to claim that this kind of facts is not real. Therefore, though the stool is not really brown in itself and, in a strict sense, "a brown stool" is just an *appearance* to a certain viewpoint, *this very appearance itself*, *the fact*

"horizon", i.e. the background upon which objects appear. I think they are not incompatible and both of them reveal certain aspects of the concept.

[91] In this chapter, we are concerned about metaphysical objectivity (and subjectivity), as contrasting with epistemological objectivity (and subjectivity) in chapter 2.

that the stool appears to a certain viewer as brown is not a *further* appearance to any other viewpoints but is real in its own right.

Accordingly, in the loose sense, we can still say that such *subjective facts* are viewpoint-independent. By that I mean though any appearance is essentially related to some viewpoints, the existence of such facts of appearance is independent of any other viewpoint from which *they* are viewed. Though the viewpoint to which the object/appearance appears is part of the fact an object **O** appears to a viewpoint **P** in a specific way **VO**, this fact itself need not be viewed from another viewpoint in order that it is real. In this sense, appearance is also part of reality. Therefore, in describing the world as a whole, we must include, besides those objective entities or facts that are independent of any viewpoint, the subjective reality of viewpoints and the appearances derived from them. To confine reality as only either objective or subjective reality in advance is to cut the universe down in size:

> The subjectivity of consciousness is an irreducible feature of reality...and it must occupy as fundamental a place in any credible world view as matter, energy, space, time, and numbers...[92]

We have seen how Nagel's conception of reality can allow room for the possibility of both the objective and the subjective reality. In section 3.2 and 3.3, we will examine how Nagel's realism about subjective and objective reality is justified against his critics. I am going to discuss how Nagel shows that the admittance of both subjective and objective reality is more reasonable than the denial of either of them, and hence why realism of the objective and the subjective reality is more plausible than both Pan-objectivism and Pan-subjectivism.

3.2 Subjective Reality

The subjective reality, if there is such thing, is the part of reality that is essentially related to a particular viewpoint. It is *the kind of fact that an object **O** appears to a certain viewer **X*** that is subjectively real in the primary sense. Here, the term "fact" is NOT employed as opposing to "value". It is used in a very broad sense, including both *descriptive facts* — facts about *what there is* and *evaluative facts* — facts about *what one should do*. A fact is subjectively real if and only if it essentially involves a viewpoint (i.e. subjective) but its existence does not require a viewpoint from which it is viewed (i.e. real).

I think the general argument of Pan-objectivism against the existence of subjective facts can be briefly stated as follows:

❶ A subjective fact essentially involves a viewpoint.

❷ Whatever essentially involves a viewpoint requires a viewpoint from which it is viewed.

❸ Anything whose existence consists in its being viewed from a viewpoint is an appearance.

It follows that:

❹ All subjective facts are appearance.

Since:

❺ What is real is independent of any viewpoint

It follows that:

❻ Appearance is not real.

Therefore,

❼ All subjective facts are not real.

The argument is unsound, for it contains false premises and the conclusion can be derived from the premises *only if* we accept a groundlessly strict interpretation of "subjective fact", "appearance" and "reality". The crucial premise is ❷. It is important because it is the source of the whole misconception of the nature of subjective facts. Granted that both ❶ and ❸

[92] *VFN*, p.26.

are true, ❹ is acceptable only if ❷ is also true. ❷ is true only if there is just one form of involvement of a viewpoint in a given fact, namely an object's being viewed from a viewpoint. However, it is not true because obviously there is at least one other way in which a fact can involve a viewpoint, i.e. the fact itself is the existence of a viewpoint. *The existence of a viewpoint essentially involves a viewpoint, but it need not be viewed from another viewpoint.* It follows that though all appearance is subjective, it is not the case that all subjective facts are appearance, and thus ❼ is also false. Even if appearance is not real, there is at least one kind of subject facts, *namely the fact that viewpoints exist*, which is not appearance and thus can be real.

Worse than that, ❻ itself is not justified unless a very strict interpretation of ❺ — one that takes "independent" *only* in the strict sense, i.e. "an object is in no way related to any viewpoint" — is justified. As in 3.1, we have seen that "an object's being independent from any viewpoint" can be understood in the loose sense, meaning "no viewpoint from which the object is viewed is required". So even if both ❹ and ❺ are true, ❻ does not follow. It is not obvious that appearance cannot be real. The concept of reality does not exclude appearance, and hence subjective facts, in advance.

Besides, Nagel provides a positive argument for the reality of subjective facts. He takes the subjective phenomena of consciousness as the starting point. He establishes them as an irreducible feature of reality in *What is it like to be a bat?*, and further develops a way to understand this kind of fact in *The View from Nowhere*. How does he accomplish this?

Nagel attacks Pan-objectivism directly at its conclusion. He rejects Pan-objectivism not by showing that ❼ does not follow from ❶ - ❻, but, more fundamentally, by arguing that its central claim ❼ should be rejected because it is intuitively unacceptable. According to Nagel, the existence of consciousness is, in my terminology, an intuitively undeniable fact, a fact that we cannot intelligibly doubt. The very act of doubting implies the existence of consciousness. The existence of consciousness involves essentially the fact that there is something like to be a certain viewer with a particular viewpoint. Even if the existence of consciousness is essentially related to a viewpoint, it does not require any viewpoint from which it is viewed. In other words, conscious activities of viewers exist even if there is no other conscious viewer

to view it. Accordingly, the existence of subjective facts of consciousness, says our sensation of pain, colour, sound, etc., are intuitively undeniable, though they may not really represent what is real about external objects. Though the chocolate cone may not really be sweet in itself, it is at least sweet for me, and *this very fact is real*. Compared with the premises of Pan-objectivism, the recognition of the reality of subjective facts is much more straightforward and obvious: *it presents itself directly to us*.

Admitting the reality of subjective facts, Pan-objectivism may still be justified if it can be shown that all these facts can be *reduced* to something objective. It can be done so if and only if it is possible to justify an objective account exhaustive of all the subjective facts. In particular, this approach, with its different variations — physicalism, behaviourism, functionalism or eliminative materialism, etc — has been dominating the discussion of philosophy of mind for the past decades in the Anglo-American world. One of Nagel's most controversial claims is precisely that the common source of all these reductionist theories — Pan-objectivism — simply misses the point, i.e. it ignores the very fact it is proposed to explain. As Nagel writes:

> Consciousness is what makes the mind-body problem really intractable. Perhaps that is why current discussions of the problem give it little attention or get it obviously wrong. The recent wave of reductionist euphoria has produced several analyses of mental phenomena and mental concepts designed to explain the possibility of some variety of materialism, psychophysical identification, or reduction. But....what makes the mind-body problem unique....is ignored.[93]

Reduction as an approach of understanding can sometimes be justified and does contribute greatly to our understanding of the physical world. The reduction of lightning to electrical discharge enables us to understand the phenomenon better. However, in reducing mental phenomena into something objective — e.g. brain states or external behaviour, something essential about

[93] "What is it Like to be a Bat?", *MQ*, p.165.

these phenomena is ignored, and this is unjustified. Nagel's anti-reductionist argument can be formulated as follows.

① Consciousness exists.

② Consciousness has subjective character essentially.[94]

③ What is essentially subjective cannot be adequately understood without taking its related viewpoint into account.

④ An objective method of understanding is one which necessarily abandons any viewpoint.[95]

It follows that:

⑤ What is essentially subjective cannot be adequately understood with an objective method of understanding

Therefore:

⑥ Consciousness cannot be adequately understood with an objective method of understanding.

The publication of "What is it like to be a bat?" invites numerous discussions and there are mainly two types of counter-argument against Nagel's view, one being metaphysical and the other epistemological. While the former tries to show that there is no distinctive subjective fact about consciousness at all (i.e. against ②), the latter attempts to prove that such subjective facts, even if they do exist, can be understood adequately with an objective method of understanding (i.e. against ③). In what follows, I would take the views of J. I. Biro[96] and Jeff Foss[97] as the representatives of these two approaches respectively and argue that they are incorrect both in their interpretation of and argument against Nagel.

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[94] Ibid., p.166.
[95] Ibid., p. 167.
[96] J. I. Biro, "Consciousness and Subjectivity", in *Consciousness*, E. Villanueva (ed.), Ridegeview, pp.113-133, 1991.
[97] Jeff Foss, "On the logic of what it is like to be a conscious subject", *Australasian Journal of*

3.21 *The Metaphysical argument*

No sensible people will seriously deny the existence of consciousness, since the very act of denying is itself a conscious process. However, one of the hottest debate in philosophy is about the *nature* of consciousness, the kind of existence consciousness is, and whether consciousness is in any sense a distinct and irreducible fact. Nagel tries to argue that consciousness is a unique kind of existence since it is essentially related to a viewpoint. As a result, consciousness has a subjective character which can only be grasped by beings capable of taking up the viewpoint or the same type of viewpoint. It follows that any objective method of understanding which proceeds by abandoning any specific viewpoint will not grasp the complete nature of consciousness.

Nagel's claim, naturally, invites attack from Pan-objectivists – those with the general attitude that anything real must be understandable through some objective means. The direct reaction to this is to claim that there is no such subjective fact at all – i.e. nothing is *both* real *and* essentially related to a viewpoint: though there is consciousness, it is in no philosophically interesting sense subjective.

In his paper "Consciousness and Subjectivity", J. I. Biro tries to establish his claim that regarding consciousness, *either* there is qualitative content but no subjectivity, *or* there is a trivial kind of subjectivity but no qualitative content, with his "Two Readings Argument". Biro's argument can be briefly stated as follows. According to Nagel, the subjectivity of consciousness is the consequence of its essential connection with a certain viewpoint. Since Nagel himself has never provided a clear explanation of his concept of viewpoint, Biro argues that there can be two possible readings of Nagel's concept of viewpoint, neither of them can establish the necessary connection between subjectivity and consciousness Nagel proposed. On the one hand, we can adopt a *fixed reading* of "**X**'s viewpoint", according to which "**X**'s viewpoint" denotes the *location* from which **X** views. **X**'s viewpoint is fixed in the sense that the viewpoint **Pa X** occupies remains the same location even

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Philosophy 67, pp.305-320, 1989.

if **X** moves to another location **Pb**. In this case, **X** changes his viewpoint from **Pa** to **Pb**. Understood in this way, there is some qualitative content of **X**'s view but nothing subjective, *since there is no reason why a location occupied by a viewer **Xa** cannot also be occupied by another viewer **Xb***:

> Locations as such are in principle sharable by different observers, at least over time (and if they are thought of as non-spatial, perhaps even at the same time). And whatever the physical possibilities, there is no problem with thinking of the same location as occupied by different observers in different possible worlds.[98]

On the other hand, we can adopt a *portable* reading of "**X**'s viewpoint", according to which "**X**'s viewpoint" is tied to the *observer* or *viewer*, defined as *whatever viewpoint **X** occupies*. It is portable because the viewer takes its viewpoint with it. In this sense, it is not possible for **Xa** and **Xb** to exchange their viewpoints even if they can exchange their respective locations. According to this reading, there is something subjective about **X**'s viewpoint but no interesting qualitative content to the subjectivity of consciousness:

> Now granted that on such a construal Nagel's conclusion that a point of view is not inter-subjectively accessible and not objectively characterizable does follow. If what matters about my experience is its mine-ness…its being so does indeed seem to be the sort of thing that cannot be included in any description of experience, and thus it may really make experience theory-resistant. The trouble is that it does so in a merely trivial way: on this reading there is no interesting qualitative content to the subjectivity that is said to elude theory. There is nothing it is like for something to be merely this person's experience rather than that one's in the sense of 'being like' that Nagel insists defines consciousness. Mere ownership does not in general contribute anything to the nature or character of the thing owned, and there is not reason to think that it does so when that thing is experience. To assume that it does is both unmotivated and, in

[98] Biro, "Consciousness and Subjectivity", p.121.

the present context, question-begging.[99]

According to Biro, Nagel faces a dilemma. He cannot adopt the fixed reading of "**X**'s viewpoint" since "on such a construal the expression seems to involve nothing that could be seen as essentially subjective"[100], because nothing would prevent two individual viewers from sharing the same viewpoint. In order to preserve the subjectivity of consciousness, Nagel must adopt the portable reading, but the cost is that Nagel's claim about subjectivity becomes trivial. There can be no interesting qualitative content to this subjective fact, and so there is *nothing* which resists an objective description[101].

Biro's account of "**X**'s viewpoint" is oversimplified. Biro himself does realize that viewpoint "typically refers to the beliefs, conceptual framework or even values of some subject or group", and "Nagel sometimes so use it"[102]. However, he thinks "if the radical claims about subjectivity and consciousness blocking the path of objective science are to be sustained on the basis of the notion, *a more precise and somewhat narrower construal* must be adopted (my emphasis)"[103]. His construal is indeed very narrow, but, in my opinion, far from being precise, and such a narrow construal is totally unnecessary to establish the subjectivity of consciousness. Furthermore, I shall argue that the illusory appeal of Biro's argument lies mainly in his confusion of two pairs of concept: subjectivity with *privacy*, and objectivity with *publicity*.

We can grant that both the fixed reading and portable reading of "**X**'s viewpoint" are supported by our everyday usage of the phrase. On the one hand, we use the phrase "**X**'s viewpoint" to refer to the specific set of pre-conditions which **X** happens to have[104]. In this sense a viewpoint is not

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[99] Biro, "Consciousness and Subjectivity", p.122.

[100] Ibid, p.129.

[101] The triviality of the portable reading of "**X**'s viewpoint" can be shown with the following example. Suppose Mr. B has just bought a new BMW and argues that no one can steal his car:

	B1	By "my car" I denote whatever car I own.
	B2	When my car is stolen, it is no longer owned by me.
It follows that:	B3	When a car is still mine, it cannot be stolen, and when it is stolen, it is no longer mine.
Therefore:	B4	My car cannot be stolen.

Certainly, there is no, *prima facie*, philosophically interesting content about "Mr. B's BMW". By analogy, it is only trivial to stress the subjective feature of "**X**'s viewpoint".

[102] Biro, "Consciousness and Subjectivity", p.117.

[103] Ibid., pp.117-118.

[104] Here, I am using "fixed reading" in its primary sense, meaning that a viewpoint tied not to the

essentially tied to **X** and so can be adopted by other viewers similar enough in the relevant aspects. On the other hand, we do sometimes employ the phrase in a portable way, referring to whatever viewpoint **X** has, and claim that when **X** takes up the viewpoint of another viewer **Y**, the set of pre-conditions identified as "**Y**'s viewpoint" is now called **X**'s viewpoint. What is the significance of this distinction? For Biro, Nagel can only adopt either the fixed or the portable reading, and while he cannot adopt the former, his adoption of the latter renders his claim trivial. However, I do not see why Nagel cannot adopt the fixed reading and retain his claim about subjectivity.

First of all, there is no reason why the fixed reading of "**X**'s viewpoint" should include location *alone*. Biro seems to justify his narrow construal on the ground that we should separate the question about reduction of intentional phenomena (other than phenomena of qualia) from the same question about consciousness. Granted that it is true, i.e. we should concentrate on the question about consciousness alone in the present context, and that beliefs, values and conceptual framework are irrelevant, there is still no reason why **X**'s *physiological and psychological constitution* can be excluded from "**X**'s viewpoint". The fact that they are at least as relevant as its location (taking literally) in rendering any of its conscious acts possible is so obvious that Biro's exclusion seems puzzling. One plausible explanation is that limiting the denotation of "**X**'s viewpoint" to location might make his point look more convincing. If on a fixed reading, "**X**'s viewpoint" only denotes its specific spatial location, it is obvious that any viewer other than **X** may occupy **X**'s viewpoint", and it, Biro thinks, shows that there is nothing subjective about consciousness. However, if the physiological and psychological constitutions of **X** are included, it seems that at least creatures of other species are not able to occupy **X**'s viewpoint. This in turn undermines Biro's claim that if we adopt the fixed reading, there is nothing subjective about consciousness. Nagel, then, can simply adopt the fixed reading and need not be pushed to the trivial portable reading.

Biro seems to be aware of this problem and in the discussion about the case of different species in section 3 of his paper, he seems to have

viewer, without adopting Biro's interpretation of limiting the denotation of viewpoint to location alone.

modified his fixed reading by admitting that we should also include **X**'s physiological and psychological constitutions:

> We can grant that a being with perceptual apparatus *A** will not perceive things in the same way as a being with perceptual apparatus *B**, so that if *A* has one and *B* the other, they will perceive things differently. But after *A* and *B* exchange places, not only can we still say…that each would still see what the other had seen before, but more importantly, we could say that each would perceive as the other would if it had the other's perceptual apparatus. If *A* were in *B*'s place, with *B**, he would have the same experience as *B* in fact has (and vice versa). (The same kind of experience qualitatively, that is, not, obviously, numerically the same experience.)[105]

From the above, Biro concludes, "Counterfactuals like these make no reference to anything essentially subjective."[106] In other words, though it is not as obvious as the case of location, it is not impossible that other viewers **Y** may be equipped with the same type of perceptual apparatus as **X**. As a result, **Y** may know more or less the same as **X** himself about what it is like to be **X**. If it is possible at all, there is, Biro believes, nothing uniquely subjective to consciousness. Therefore, Nagel still has to adopt the portable reading, and only by adopting such a narrow construal may the "anti-objectivists" like Nagel show that there is something uniquely subjective about consciousness.

Here, Biro betrays his confusion of subjectivity with privacy, and objectivity with publicity. Nagel can accept the whole passage quoted above without giving up the subjectivity of consciousness. Biro's challenge makes sense only if by "the subjective character of consciousness" Nagel means "the private character of consciousness", i.e. it is accessible only to *one* single individual. When Biro says his case of A and B exchanging their locations and perceptual apparatus shows that there is nothing essentially *subjective*, he means that there is nothing *private*, nothing *accessible only to one single*

See what follows.

[105] Biro, "Consciousness and Subjectivity", p. 124..

[106] Ibid., p. 124.

individual. However, Nagel never advocates anything like that. According to him, that something is subjective means *merely* that it is *essentially related to a viewpoint*[107] and can only be understood adequately from the specific viewpoint giving rise to it. It does not imply that it is only accessible to one single individual, for, on the fixed reading, it is always possible for more than one viewer to occupy the same viewpoint. Or, in other words, there is always room for intersubjectivity (though it is not equal to objectivity). That an object **O** can only be understood from a specific viewpoint **P** is not in any way incompatible with the fact that more than one viewer can occupy **P**. And that **P** can be occupied by more than one viewer does not entail that **O** can be understood adequately without considering the corresponding viewpoint **P**. Even if there is really nothing privately accessible to only one individual when we adopt the fixed reading, it does nothing against Nagel's claim about the reality of the subjective character of experience. *Subjectivity and privacy are simply two different concepts*[108], and Nagel states this explicitly:

> I am not adverting here to the alleged privacy of experience to its possessor. The point of view in question is not one accessible only to a single individual. Rather it is a type. It is often possible to take up a point of view other than one's own, so the comprehension of such facts is not limited to one's own case.[109]

Ironically, instead of trivializing Nagel's claim, the example quoted above *in fact* explicates more clearly the essential nature of subjective fact: unless A and B exchange both their locations and perceptual apparatus, they cannot have the same view of an object.

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[107] See section 3.1.

[108] Similar criticism can also be applied to the view of Patricia Hanna, "Must thinking Bats be Conscious?", in *Philosophical Investigation*, 13:4 October 1990, p. 350-355;

[109] "What is it like to be a bat?", in *MQ*, p. 173.

3.22 The Epistemological argument

Let us now turn to another type of objection against Nagel's claim about subjective reality. Some philosophers admit that consciousness has subjective character in Nagel's sense, i.e. there is something that it is like to be the viewer, which links essentially to its viewpoint. What they deny is that this character cannot be understood/explained/characterized exhaustively with some objective methods.

In his paper "On The Logic Of What It Is Like To Be a Conscious Subject", Jeff Foss defends physicalism against Nagel's subjectivism with his "Super Neuroscientist Argument". He approaches the problem by invoking a thought experiment with the introduction of two methodological devices: the Super Neuro-Scientist [**SNS**] and the Super Sympathist [**SS**]. On the one hand, **SNS** is "a conscious being who knows all of the objective facts about the conscious being we care to consider", and "what it is like to be the **SNS** is radically unlike what it is like to be any terrestrial organism"[110]. On the other hand, **SS** is a being which possesses "a plastic, self-metamorphosing nervous system" and is thus "able to assume the structure of other conscious beings" and "have experiences which are qualitatively identical, with respect to subjective character, to those of any other conscious being"[111]. Foss then formulates the physicalist and the subjectivist thesis [PT and ST] as below:

> PT: The **SNS** knows both in general, and in particular, what it is like to be any sort of , or particular, conscious being.[112]
>
> ST: The Physicalist Thesis is false, for there is a sort of fact, about conscious states unlike those that **SNS** can have, which **SS** can know through having the states in question, facts which **SNS** cannot know (or even conceive of) simply because she cannot have them or anything sufficiently similar to them.[113]

Foss tries to prove that even if consciousness has subjective character i.e. something that is essentially connected to a viewpoint, no mentioning of or

[110] Foss, "On the logic of what it is like to be a conscious subject", p. 209.
[111] Ibid., p. 210.
[112] Ibid., p. 209.

referring to that viewpoint is needed in order to understand it. He invites us to a thought experiment of determining if "there is something that **SS** can know, but **SNS** cannot, about what it is like to be us"[114]. He claims that once we engage in this thought experiment, we would all accept the conclusion that **SNS** can know/understand everything about the subjective character of any particular conscious being. His main argument runs as follows:

i) By hypothesis, **SNS** *can know all that I did, do and will say (and would have said)* - which is *an objective fact*.

ii) i) implies that **SNS** *can describe* my own experience as well as I do.

iii) ii) implies that **SNS** *can understand* perfectly my description of my subjective conscious states.

iv) iii) implies that **SNS** can understand perfectly what it is like for me to be me, even if she does not (by hypothesis) share my viewpoint at all.[115]

Therefore,

v) The subjective character of my consciousness, i.e. what it is like to be me, can be understood objectively.

What, then, is wrong with Nagel's account? Why does Nagel think that the subjective character of experience must be understood from the very viewpoint giving rise to it? In explaining this, Foss adopts a Churchlandish point, saying that Nagel has confused experience and the knowledge of experience. "To experience is not to know what you experience"[116], and it is not necessary *to be me* in order *to know* what it is like to be me. Although **SNS** cannot have the same experience as mine, she can know perfectly well what my experience is. Therefore, there is no reason to say that the subjective character of consciousness cannot be understood objectively.

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[113] Foss, "On the logic of what it is like to be a conscious subject", p. 210.

[114] Ibid..

[115] Ibid., p. 211. He also tries to argue further that the SNS can describe, understand and conceive of my experience better than both the SS and me. I would not discuss this claim here, for I think he is not even warranted to say that the SNS can describe, understand and conceive of my experience *as well as* the SS and me.

Is this argument sound? I think it is not, for it is grounded upon a problematic premise i). The appeal of the argument lies in the intuition that *if **SNS** knows all that I did, do and will say about my experience*, she must know what it is like to be me at least as well as I (and **SS**) do. Otherwise, how is it possible for her to do so? The problem with the argument is precisely that Foss begs the question when he stipulates that **SNS** knows all that I did, do and will say about my experience.

At first glance, Foss seems to be justified in claiming that **SNS** does know this since it is an objective fact, and **SNS** knows *all* objective facts (a hypothesis which is accepted by the subjectivists). But what does it mean to say that **SNS** knows all that I say? Suppose I utter the words "I am in pain" to describe what I feel at time t1. On the one hand, **SNS** may be said to know what I say in the sense that she *knows the occurrence of the fact* that I utter the words "I am in pain" at time t1. It is an objective fact since its occurrence does not depend on any viewpoint. It, however, does not follow that **SNS** can know or describe my experience. **SNS** can do so only if she, besides knowing that I utter those words, *understands* what I say. Given that what it is like to be **SNS** is radically unlike what it is like to be me, it is not obvious how she can understand what I mean by "I am in pain". To say that all the terms in my language can be understood by **SNS** illegitimately presupposes all facts can be known objectively.

Foss anticipates this objection. He gives two examples to show that one can understand a term about experience without ever *having* the experience. A doctor who has never had headaches can surely refer to my pains as I do. "After all, he can treat the pains, perhaps remove them – why can't he talk about them?[117]

Similarly, when a (natural-born) blind person talks about the colour "red", he "means the very same thing by 'red' as everyone else – the only difference is that s/he cannot see the colour red"[118]. It is, Foss argues, counterintuitive to insist that the doctor and the blind person do not refer to my pain and the colour red respectively.

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[116] Foss, "On the logic of what it is like to be a conscious subject", p. 212.
[117] Foss, "On the logic of what it is like to be a conscious subject", p. 214.
[118] Ibid..

The above examples do more harm than good to the physicalist thesis, and betray how Foss' thought experiment begs the question. Given that the doctor does *refer* to my headaches, and that the blind person does *refer* to the colour red as I do, it shows nothing about whether they can describe or know the complete nature of my pain and my perception of red. The fact that I can use a term to refer to a particular object or a kind of object does not imply that I know its essential feature[119]. When I say "I do not know the essential feature of helium", I am referring to the same helium as a chemist does without knowing any essential feature of it.

In the case of the doctor, surely he can *refer* to my headache. However, under what condition can we reasonably say that he *understands* what I mean by "I have a headache"? He must at least have experienced some kind of pain and have the ability to imagine what it is like for him to have this pain in his head. His understanding may still be partial if he has never had a real headache. And if he has never experienced any kind of pain before, he can know nothing about the subjective experience of headache at all. Whether he can treat or even remove it is irrelevant, otherwise an aspirin tablet should understand me better. In fact, what would the doctor know about my experience of headache if he has never had one before? To insist that there is nothing subjective about headache to be known simply begs the question. The trick of this example is simply that we all know that normally all doctors have experienced some kinds of pain before and so they *must know* what a certain kind of pain is like. Or to quote a line from Nagel, this thought experiment "relies implicitly on our first-person understanding of consciousness, while pretending to do without it"[120].

Similarly, though the blind person can *refer* to the colour red as I do, it does not follow that he knows as much as I about it. Knowing that stop signs are red shows nothing about his knowledge about red. If I tell you that the colour of my car is *^*, you may answer perfectly well when someone ask you what the colour of my car is, but you can have the idea of what *^* is only if you have seen it or other relevant colours which may help you, as Hume does,

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[119] See Saul A. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1990, especially Lecture II.

[120] It is originally a criticism against Daniel Dennett's strategy of "heterophenomenology" employed in *Consciousness Explained*, see "Dennett: Consciousness Dissolved", in *OM*, p. 87.

to deduce what *^* is.

From what is said above, we can see that while **SNS** can know all that I did, do and will utter, she *may not understand* all that I did, do and will say. To say that **SNS** can understand all my language because it is an objective fact is simply begging the question, assuming that all words/concepts can be understood objectively. Why can't it be that there are some words/concepts which **SNS** cannot understand because in doing so **SNS** must at least share part of my subjective constitution? That **SNS** can repeat my words "I am in pain" in no way shows that she can describe and conceive of my experience of pain as well as I do. Regarding terms of experience, the lack of experience precisely implies what Foss calls an "epistemic lack",.

This is even more obvious when Foss tries to characterize what it is like to be a bat objectively:

> To start with obvious facts about what it is like to be a bat: We know that a bat's toes do not get tired from hanging upside down from them for months at a time. We know this from the skeletal structure and ennervation of the toes. We know that the females of many species are not interested in copulation, since they are in hibernation when it occurs.[121]

Foss thinks that he has made an objective characterization of the subjective character of a bat's experience, but, in fact, he has not. It has the appearance of being so because what he cites to support his characterization is something objective, i.e. "the skeletal structure and ennervation of the toes" and "they [female bats] are in hibernation when it [copulation] occurs". However, we cannot understand what it is like for a bat to be "not tired" and "interested" unless we also assume a sufficient extent of likeness between how it feels and how we humans feel. In order words, we can know what it is like to be a bat only if we can to a sufficient extent take up its viewpoint. That "sympathy is based upon objective evidence"[122] is irrelevant, since no subjectivist (in Foss' sense) needs to deny that. What they deny is only the claim that

[121] Foss, p. 218.
[122] Ibid.

objective evidence *alone* is *sufficient* for our knowing what it is like to be a bat. It follows that Foss has given either an exhaustive but not purely objective, or a purely objective but not exhaustive characterization of what it is like to be a bat. Therefore, the claim that what is subjective can be understood/explained/described exhaustively with some objective methods is not justified.

From what is said above, we can see why common challenges against the reality of the subjective character of consciousness are not justified. Essentially connected to and understandable only from a viewpoint, it is nevertheless a part of reality, as Nagel writes:

> Reality is not just objective reality, and any objective conception of reality must include an acknowledgment of its own incompleteness...Even if an objective general conception of mind were developed and added to the physical conception of objectivity, it would have to include the qualification that the exact character of each of the experiential and intentional perspectives with which it deals can be understood only from within or by subjective imagination.....In saying this we have not given up the idea of the way the world really is, independently of how it appears to us or to any particular occupant of it. We have only given up the idea that this coincides with what can be objectively understood. The way the world is includes appearances, and there is no single point of view from which they can all be fully grasped.[123]

3.3 Objective Reality

3.31 Objective Reality: Intelligible or not?

In 3.1, we see that, for Nagel, reality refers to what is the case from no particular viewpoint. We learn further, in 3.2, that this conception of reality does not rule out the subjective realm in advance and attempts to expel it

[123] *VFN*, p. 26.

have failed. It follows that it is reasonable to acknowledge subjective reality and hence Pan-objectivism is false. The recognition of the reality of the subjective character of consciousness, according to Nagel, interestingly provides us with a strong reason for rejecting Pan-subjectivism. Given that subjective facts are essentially connected to viewpoints and we cannot have an adequate understanding of them without taking up the viewpoints, and we have reason to believe that there are viewpoints (says the viewpoint of bats, other animals or even other intelligent beings) we cannot adequately occupy, it seems to follow not only that there are facts which cannot be adequately grasped objectively, but also that there are facts *inconceivable to us*. Once this is acknowledged, we cannot but admit that there may also be aspects of reality which are inconceivable by any finite mind at all. The world, in this sense, is not merely our world, i.e. a human world. Though some aspects of it are essentially connected some viewpoints, it is, as a whole, an independent world to which we human beings and all other conscious and reflective beings

On the contrary, Pan-subjectivism, as I have defined in 3.1, is the view that everything real is ultimately subjective. An object **O** can be intelligibly said to be real only if it is viewable – perceivable and/or conceivable - *to us* from *our* viewpoint. In other words, **O** is not real if it is not conceivable to us. Or, to put it more precisely, it is simply unintelligible to talk about something which is real but inconceivable to us. According to Nagel, this view is at least, At first glance, counter-intuitive. Such view conflicts with most of our commonsensical beliefs. People may hold different views about the world, some of which may even be unimaginably strange to us. They all, however, either implicitly or explicitly, endorse the idea that the world is not their (or anyone else's) world, that it exists whether there are human beings or not. In a word, we all have a natural view that the world is independent of our thought:

> The idea that the contents of the universe are limited by our capacity for thought is easily recognized as a philosophical view, which at first sight seems crazily self-important given what small and contingent pieces of the universe we are. It is a view that no one would hold

> except for philosophical reasons that seem to rule out the natural picture"[124]

This, of course, is not a sufficient reason for us to reject Pan-subjectivism. We cannot conclude that Pan-subjectivism is wrong *merely* on the ground that it conflicts with our commonsense, since there are numerous cases showing what seemed bizarre at first turns out to be the correct account of reality. This tension between Pan-subjectivism and our commonsense, nevertheless, gives us reason to doubt the credibility of Pan-subjectivism. To support such a strong (and strange) view, one must have a very strong and convincing argument. What a Pan-subjectivist must do is to show that the very idea of an independent reality (of any viewer) is incoherent and, hence or otherwise, unintelligible[125]. What is its argument?

Realism about objective reality entertains the claim that:

R There is something ϕ which is *real* and is *inconceivable* to us[126].

The immediate response of a Pan-subjectivist may be as follows. The fact that we *can assert* that ϕ is real implies that ϕ is conceivable to us. How can we assert anything, including its existence, about ϕ if it is not conceivable to us? This, however, is not an adequate reply. On the one hand, we should remember that "ϕ" is just a symbol representing *that something* which is real, and not a specific name for a specific object we have identified. A Realist may concede that that is *all* that we can possibly conceive about ϕ; we can know nothing about what it is and its nature *except* that it is real. Realism about objective reality can hold even if we make that concession. On the other hand, what is in question is whether the fact that ϕ is real is independent of our viewpoint. That it is *conceivable* to us does not in itself implies that it is

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[124] *VFN*. p. 92.

[125] "...[idealism] is the position that what there is must be possibly conceivable by us, or possibly something for which we could have evidence. An argument for this general form of idealism must show that the notion of what *cannot* be thought about by us or those like us makes no sense", *VFN*, p.93.

subjective, i.e. it existence depends on its being viewable to *us*. While the former claim is epistemological, the latter is metaphysical, and any connection between them is not obvious. To support Pan-subjectivism, a much stronger connection between the reality and conceivability of ϕ must be established. In other words, the Pan-subjectivist has to justify an *epistemological test of reality*. It is not sufficient to show that ϕ is real *and* conceivable. It must be shown that:

PS ϕ is real *only if* it is conceivable to us.

There are various arguments for the fundamental thesis of Pan-subjectivism **PS**. In this section, I am going to examine one of the most influential arguments against objective reality in the contemporary philosophical discussion. I will examine Donald Davidson's rejection of the intelligibility of the idea of an independent, uninterpreted reality. Davidson endorses **PS** in his rejection of any *sense* in talking about an objective reality, reality which is independent of any viewpoint (i.e. *conceptual scheme*). He considers the idea of different conceptual schemes presupposes "something neutral and common that lies outside all schemes"[127], and such uninterpreted "something" is unintelligible.

3.32 Davidson's Rejection of Objective Reality

One of the most remarkable arguments for **PS** is provided by Davidson. His argument aims originally at refuting conceptual relativism, the doctrine that "Reality itself is relative to a scheme: what counts as real in one system may not in another"[128]. According to him, conceptual relativism implies

[126] That is, we cannot conceive ϕ *from our viewpoint.*

[127] Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme", in *Inquiries into Truth and interpretation*, Oxford University Press, 1984, p. 190.

[128] Davidson, "On the Very Idea of Conceptual Scheme", p. 183. It seems that what Davidson advocates is incompatible with Putnam's internal realism, which is, as I am going to argue in the next section, in fact a specific version of conceptual relativism (it is more evident if we take a look at his discussion of the difference between Carnap's world and the world of Polish logician in *The Many*

that there are different incommensurable conceptual schemes, which presupposes the distinction between conceptual scheme and uninterpreted reality. By showing that the scheme/content distinction is unintelligible and is "itself a dogma of empiricism, the third dogma"[129], Davidson claims to have shown that the idea of an alternative conceptual scheme which is untranslatable to ours does not make sense, and hence conceptual relativism is not intelligible. In refuting conceptual relativism, Davidson also rejects the idea of an "uninterpreted reality", something "neutral and common that lies outside all schemes"[130], i.e. independent of our conceptual scheme. In other words, he gives up the idea of *objective* reality (in Nagel's sense), i.e. reality which is independent of any viewpoint. How does Davidson's argument against the idea of an alternative conceptual scheme, i.e. a conceptual scheme that is "largely true but not translatable"[131], have any implication on our idea of objective reality?

Objective reality exists independently of any viewpoint. How can we show that this idea does not make sense? Is it sufficient to show that there is always a *possibility* that there may be some kind of mind (whose nature may be unknown to us) which produces the reality which we consider to be objective? Anyway, how can anyone rule this possibility out? Perhaps it is really a possibility, in the sense that it is logically possible. However, it is obvious that merely stating the possibility does not automatically proves that it is the most plausible one. Moreover, it is difficult to see what further proof can be given to support such a hypothesis, given such a vague concept of that "creative" mind whose nature is claimed to be unknown to us. In fact, no contemporary idealist is really serious about such an unpromising proposal.

Still, there is a more plausible approach. The idea of objective reality is intelligible only if the idea of some aspects of reality whose existence is inconceivable to us is intelligible. If we can show that any talk of the existence of an entity is intelligible *only if* it is conceivable *to us*, we can have a strong

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Faces of Realism, p. 18-21). Therefore, it seems strange that Putnam cites Davidson, with his rejection of the distinction between "scheme" and "content", as a supporter for his view (p. 20).

[129] Davidson, p. 190.

[130] Ibid., p. 198.

[131] Ibid, p. 194.

case against any talk of objective reality. As we have mentioned, realism of objective reality claims that:

R There is something ϕ which is *real* and is *inconceivable to us*.

R commits us to the thought that:

R1 It is *true* (or *it is the case*) that ϕ *exists*, but we *cannot conceive* anything else about it.

R1 amounts to saying:

R2 No other concepts we possess *except* our general concept of "something being true"(or "something exists", "something being the case") can apply to ϕ.[132]

R2 implies:

R3 There is a conceptual scheme (a set of interrelated concepts) which is *largely true in our sense* but is constituted of concepts *different from ours significantly*.

R3 means exactly:

R4 There is a conceptual scheme which is largely true but *not translatable* to ours.

R4 is Davidson's formulation of the idea of *alternative conceptual scheme*. How well we can understand it depends on "how well we understand the notion of truth, as applied to a language, independent of the notion of translation", and his answer is that "we do not understand it independently at all"[133]. Why is it the case?

Suppose there are two languages **L1** (our language) and **L2**, and **s** is a sentence in **L2**. We can say that **s** is true (in our sense) only if we can specific its truth condition in **L1**. In other words, we must be able to say:

s is true if and only if **p**

where **p** is a translation of **s** in **L1**. If we cannot specify the truth condition for **s** in our language, we cannot determine whether **s** is true or not. It amounts to saying that we cannot determine the truth value of **s** if **s** is not translatable

[132] *VFN*, p. 93.
[133] Davidson, p. 194.

to our language **L1**. Therefore, if **L2** expresses a different conceptual scheme from **L1**, its sentences must both be true *and* untranslatable to **L1**. Since we cannot assert that **L2** is true without assuming that it is translatable to **L1**, we do not really understand what an alternative conceptual scheme can be.

Now the realist asserts that "ϕ exists" is true both in **L1** and **L2**, and all other true sentences about ϕ in **L2** are *not translatable* to sentences in our language **L1**. Can he make this assertion intelligibly? Davidson argues that we cannot because of *the principle of charity*. In order to assert that a sentence **s** is true, we must first be able to interpret it as something we can understand. Interpretation of **s** involves two interdependent aspects: the attribution of *beliefs* to the speaker *and* the interpretation of the *meaning* of **s**. We cannot make sense of **s** without knowing its meaning, but knowing the meaning of **s** requires us to know the beliefs of the speaker of **s**. Suppose a man **X** pointing at a deer utters the word "it is a horse". How should you interpret what he says? On the one hand, it may be the case that **X** has mistaken a deer for a horse, i.e. he holds a false *belief* about what he sees. On the other hand, it may be that his "horse" *means* exactly what you mean by "deer" and he does not hold any false belief at all. The interdependence lies in the fact that without knowing the beliefs of **X**, we cannot understand the meaning of his utterance, while without first knowing the meaning of his words, we cannot know what beliefs he holds.

Apparently, there is no way out of the circularity involved in the interpretation of belief and meaning, which seems to follow that we cannot even start our interpretation and so understanding is impossible. However, Davidson argues that the ridiculous conclusion does not follow. Given that interpretation is possible, the question is *how* it is possible. Davidson claims that interpretation is possible *only if* we adopt the principle of charity, that is, to assume that there is general agreement on beliefs between **X** and us[134]. Here, we neither assume any knowledge of the meaning of his sentences nor any knowledge about what his beliefs are. We only assume that he is correct about most of the things *from our viewpoint*. Otherwise, we simply have no ground to regard what he utters as meaningful sentences at all:

[134] Davidson, p. 196.

> Charity is forced on us; whether we like it or not, if we want to understand others, we must count them right in most matters...We make maximum sense of the words and thoughts of others when we interpret in a way that optimizes agreement.[135]

Accordingly, the realist cannot sensibly assert *both* that "ϕ exists" is true (in both **L1** and **L2**) *and all* other true statements about ϕ in **L2** is untranslatable to **L1**, since it violates the principle of charity. To assert that "ϕ exist" is true in both **L1** and **L2** implies that speakers of **L2** and we have general agreement on beliefs about ϕ. Otherwise, how can we assert that "ϕ exists" is true? How can we know that we are talking about the same object? But to say that we have general agreement on beliefs about ϕ means that what is true about ϕ in **L2** can be translated into sentences in **L1**. It follows that the realist is wrong, and when he talks about the idea of something real but inconceivable to us, he is talking about either something which is conceivable to us, or nothing at all.

How does Nagel respond to it? First of all, he shows that Davidson's argument will lead to some intuitively unacceptable consequences. If what is said above is true, it follows ***not only*** that *we* cannot talk sensibly about an objective reality which is inconceivable to *us*, ***but also*** that *no intelligent being*[136] can ever form any idea of reality inconceivable to *him*, whatever he is. For *any* intelligent being **X**, if he tries to form such an idea, he is condemned to fail since he will violate the principle of charity as we do. To talk about the reality of θ which is inconceivable to him, **X** is asserting that there is something θ to which only his concepts of "truth" and "existence" and no other concepts he possesses can apply. It amounts to saying that there is an alternative conceptual scheme (says, **Sy**, which is the conceptual scheme of **Y**, intelligent being of a different species) to that of **X** (**Sx**). However, according to Davidson's argument, ***X*** *cannot intelligibly assert* that **Sy** is both a conceptual scheme and untranslatable to **Sx**. Therefore, no matter whose

[135] Davidson, p. 197.

[136] By "intelligent being", I mean reflective being which is capable of developing thought about itself and reality.

conceptual scheme **Sy** is, it must be translatable to **Sx**, and so whatever is conceivable to **Y** is conceivable to **X**. It follows that *nothing* that is conceivable to an intelligent being **Y**, whatever **Y** is, is inconceivable to **X**, whatever **X** is.

What has just been said, however, cannot be true. It is obviously false that nothing is inconceivable to **X**, whatever he is and that he cannot think sensibly of the idea of objective reality independent of him. Suppose there is a world in which there are two congenital nine-year-old boys - one with realist aspiration (let's follow Nagel to call him Realist junior[137]), and the other holds a Davidsonian anti-realist view (let's call him Davidson junior) - and we adult human beings, who are capable of conceiving some aspects of the world which is beyond the cognitive capability of the two boys. Besides, the two boys are not aware of our existence. Suppose further that Realist junior speculates that

H There are aspects of reality which are inconceivable to him.

The question now is that: Will Realist junior be just talking nonsense in doing so? Is what he is thinking about a sensible hypothesis about the world? Davidson junior would argue that the intelligibility of the hypothesis presupposes the idea of alternative conceptual scheme which cannot be endorsed by Realist junior. Therefore, with the above argument, he will conclude that **H** is *unintelligible*. However, it seems to be strange to deny that **H** is intelligible. Notes that what is at issue is not whether **H** is *true* or whether Realist junior has any *ground* to assert that it is true, but whether **H** is *intelligible* at all. How can we determine that? We must try to understand what **H** means from our viewpoint, which means, according to the principle of charity, we must take most of Realist junior's belief to be true, i.e. assuming that we have general agreement on beliefs. One of our belief is that there are some aspects of the world which are *inconceivable to the two congenital nine-year-old boys*, and it is shared by Realist junior and us (but not Davidson junior). It may be true that Realist junior can have no ground to assert that **H** is *true*, but it does not mean that it is *unintelligible*. From our point of view, **H** expresses a hypothesis which is not only intelligible, translatable to our

[137] *VFN*, p. 96.

language but also true, and Davidson junior is clearly wrong. As Nagel puts it:

> According to Davidson (as far as I can see) I could say that Realist junior was right and Davidson junior wrong, but Realist junior would be wrong to agree with me – as Davidson junior would no doubt point out to him. This doesn't make the doctrine any less paradoxical. And if these consequences are unacceptable with regard to the nine-year-olds, they are unacceptable with regard to us.[138]

It follows it is not the case that nothing is inconceivable to **X** (whatever he is) and that he cannot think sensibly of the idea of objective reality independent of him.

The problem with the Davidsonian argument is that the principle of charity is not necessarily incompatible with the idea of alternative conceptual scheme. Granted that the principle of charity is the condition of possibility of any interpretation and/or translation, we may still make sense of the idea of alternative conceptual scheme. That **L2** is translatable to **L1** does not rule out the possibility that they express different conceptual schemes. The appearance that it does is due to our ignorance of the asymmetry character of the notion of translation. The fact that **L2** is translatable to **L1** does not imply that **L1** is also translatable to **L2**. In other words, I can translate all the sentences in the language of Realist junior into sentences in mine, but he may not be able to do the same thing[139]. He simply, by hypothesis, lacks the conceptual tools to do the translation. To him, our conceptual scheme, though with some overlapping, is inconceivable and different from his, and so the portion of reality conceivable to us may not be equally conceivable to him. It follows that the idea of independent and inconceivable reality to Realist junior is at least intelligible. If this idea is intelligible, so is the idea that there is reality independent of and inconceivable to *us*, for we are in exactly the same situation in our speculation about it. Whether there are *really* some "higher

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[138] *VFN*, p. 97.

[139] "I might be able to translate a sentence of someone else's language into a sentence of my language, even though he cannot translate my sentence into his", *VFN*, p. 97.

beings" is not essential to our point, just as whether we exist or not is irrelevant to the intelligibility of Reality junior's hypothesis.

One useful way to assess a linguistic theory is to test it against our linguistic practices and the intuition goes with it, for they are the data which any linguistic theories claim to explain. Theories which entail consequences which are contrary to our linguistic practices – such as "meaning is impossible", "reference is impossible" or "no one ever mean what they intend to mean", etc. - are for that reason untenable[140]. The Davidsonian picture seems to be wrong because it implies such an implausible result, namely we cannot sensibly speculate that there may be portions of reality inconceivable to *us*. We clearly can and do do this all the time. The fact that Davidson's theory of interpretation has such a counter-intuitive implication seems to undermine the theory itself, rather than rendering the idea of objective reality unintelligible.

What is said above can be reinforced if we can show further that such an idea is natural in the light of our linguistic practice. Nagel himself provides a much more plausible picture about what is thinkable. As anyone can easily recognize,

> Every concept that we have contains potentially the idea of its own complement – the idea of what the concept doesn't apply to. Unless it has been shown positively that there cannot be such things – that the idea involves some kind of contradiction (like the idea of things that are not self-identical) - we are entitled to assume that it make sense even if we can say nothing more about the members of the class, and have never met one[141].

For example, if we have the concept "apple" which applies to a certain kind of fruit, we also, at the same time, have the complementary concept of "what is *not* an apple", which applies to "the collection of all things that do not belong to the original class"[142]. In this case, it is the class of non-apple, e.g. pineapple, woman, cars, music, etc. We may not be able to specify all the members or their characteristics of this complementary class,

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[140] This strategy is employed by Kripke in his argument against the description theory of name, see Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*.

[141] *VFN*, p. 97-98.

[142] Irving. M. Copi and Carl Cohen, *Introduction to Logic*, 9th edition, Macmillan Publishing Company,

but it does not in any way imply that the class of non-apple is empty, or the notion unintelligible. To generalize what is said above, we can say that for any one of our concepts α, we also have a corresponding concept $\sim\alpha$, which refers to everything that is not α. Our having the concept $\sim\alpha$ does not require us to have a clear conception of what $\sim\alpha$ is. Instead, it is enough for us to have a clear conception of α. Unless it can be shown that $\sim\alpha$ involves self-contradiction (e.g. things that are not self-identical), or denial of existence (i.e. things that do not exist), we cannot say that $\sim\alpha$ is unintelligible or has no reference. That is simply the way we ordinarily talk and use our concepts.

Therefore, it seems to be groundless to rule out the intelligibility of the concepts such as "all the things we can't describe", "all the things we can't imagine", "all the things humans can't conceive of", and "all the things no finite mind could ever form a conception of"[143]. Such an idea of objective reality may not be of much cognitive *significance* to us (for we may not be able to have comprehensive knowledge about it), but it shows neither that it is *unintelligible* nor that there is no such reality.

3.4 The Inescapability of the Idea of Subjective and Objective Reality

In 3.2 and 3.3, we have seen that various attempts to render both the ideas of subjective and objective reality unintelligible fail. Nagel, however, does not stop with that. He positively argues that both of the ideas are inescapable to all rational reflective beings. We *cannot rationally and intelligibly deny* that there is something whose existence is essentially connected to a certain viewpoint, and that there is something which is independent of any viewers. These two kinds of fact are real in the sense that they are not merely appearance. In other words, both of their existences are not ultimately consisted in their being viewed by an external viewer. The beliefs that there is subjective reality and that there is objective reality are

1994, p. 221.

[143] *VFN*, p. 98.

intuitively unrevisable.

We should notice that what is said above is just a claim about the general ideas of subjective reality and objective reality. I am not (neither is Nagel) claiming that there must be something it is like to be a bat, or the table before my eyes must be something independent of me. It is always possible to discover that, through empirical means or otherwise, bats are not conscious and the table is just a dream-table. We can always deny the reality of any *particular* fact (subjective or objective) by showing that it is *only* an appearance for a particular viewer from its specific viewpoint. However, we cannot sensibly deny subject and objective reality *as such*, claiming that *nothing* is real subjectively or *nothing* is real objectively.

3.41 The Inescapability of the Idea of Subjective Reality

We cannot escape the idea of subjective reality. The belief in subjective reality (not something essentially private but something essentially connected to viewpoints) is an instance of unrevisable intuitive belief because we do not have any sensible alternative to it. As conscious beings, we necessarily view the world from a certain viewpoint (see 2.3). Our view – perception and/or conception - is determined, at least partly, by the specific viewpoint we occupy. As a result, when we view an object **O**, it appears to us in a specific way **VO** which is (to a certain extent) determined by our viewpoint **P**. This specific *appearance* of **O** (i.e. how **O** appears to us) **VO**, is essentially connected to **P** from which it arises[144]. However, it would be wrong to conclude that **VO** cannot be a part of reality. Although **VO** may not represent what **O** is *in itself*, i.e. independent of any viewer, *that **O** appears to us as **VO*** is a real fact, a fact whose existence does not consist in its being viewed by other viewers. To engage in the thought that there is no subjective reality involves the self-contradictory rejection of our act of thinking about it.

Furthermore, in conceiving our act of viewing and the resulting view of the world, we cannot but conceive them as situated in the *objective* order, not in the *strict* sense they are in no way related to any viewpoint, but in the

[144] As we have discussed in chapter 2, it is identical with our *view* of **O**, i.e. how we view – perceive

loose sense that their existence does not consist in being viewed by any further viewer. Even if our thought is all that the world consists of, we can only take it as the way the world is *in itself*. This leads us to the inescapability of the idea of objective reality.

3.42 The Inescapability of the Idea of Objective Reality

As we have seen in 3.3, the possibility of objectivity reality cannot be ruled out by saying that the idea is unintelligible. More than this, Nagel argues that the idea that "there is some way the world is" is, like the idea of subjective reality, inescapable for all rational reflective beings. But why is it so? Suppose the Pan-subjectivist challenges us in the following way. Granted we do have the idea of objective reality, the Pan-subjectivist may argue – under the name of internal realist – that "our apparently objective world picture should be understood as essentially a creative product of our language and point of view, and the truth of our beliefs should be understood as their survival in an ideal development of that point of view"[145]. In other words, such an idea simply refers to nothing:

> To talk of 'facts' without specifying the language to be used is to talk of nothing; the word 'fact' no more has its use fixed by Reality itself than does the word 'exist' or the word 'object'[146]

What does it mean? How does Nagel respond to this challenge? In this section, I will discuss Hilary Putnam's internal realism and see if it works.

According to Putnam, it makes sense and is true to say that something *really* exists. The sun in the sky and the computer in front of you are as real as common people think. The problem is *in what sense* they are real. Putnam distinguishes two philosophical perspectives about the status of reality. On the one hand, there is the externalist perspective, conceiving reality from a God's Eye point of view, or, in Nagel's term, the view from nowhere. Such perspective gives rise to *metaphysical realism* (**MR**), which endorses the idea of objective reality :

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and/or conceive - **O**, if we consider **VOa** from the viewpoint of the viewer.

[145] *LW*, p. 87.

> ...the world consists of some fixed totality of mind-independent objects. There is exactly one true and complete description of 'the way the world is'. Truth involves some sort of correspondence relation between words or thought-signs and external things and sets of things.[147]

On the other hand, there is the internalist perspective, leading to the position of *internal realism* (**IR**) which claims that "'Objects' do not exist independently of conceptual schemes"[148]. What is real is *internal* to a specific theory or language. To talk about a viewpoint-independent reality as the metaphysical realist does is to talk about nothing.

Why should we accept internal realism? The argument Putnam provides seems to be of the following pattern. Regarding the question of whether ϕ is real, we can hold either a realist view or a relativist view. For a relativist, "every person (or, in a modern 'sociological' formulation, every culture, or sometimes every 'discourse') has his (its) own views, standards, presuppositions, and that truth (and also justification) are relative to *these*"[149]. Accordingly, a person **A** (*whoever he is*) can say ϕ is real while another person **B** can say ϕ is not real without being contradictory to each other. *Both* of them are equally right. Putnam argues that this is an untenable view[150]. On the other hand, a realist claims that there is an *objective* answer to the question. We cannot, in some sense, choose our answer arbitrarily. If we want to retain realism, we can hold either metaphysical realism or internal realism. If we can show that the former is false, we can justify the latter. Putnam thinks that he has accomplished the task. What, then, is his argument?

According to Putnam, metaphysical realism consists of, as we can see from the passage quoted above, two essential claims:

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[146] Hilary Putnam, *The Many Faces of Realism*, LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1987, p. 36.
[147] Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 49.
[148] Ibid, p. 52.
[149] Ibid, p. 121.
[150] See chapter 5 "Two conceptions of rationality" in *Reason, Truth and History* and "Why Reason Can't Be Naturalized" in *Reason and Realism: Philosophical papers, vol.3*, Cambridge University Press, 1983.

[I] The world (or reality) is *viewpoint-independent*; and

[II] There is *exactly one* true and complete description of the way the world is.[151]

Putnam has never explained clearly the relation between **[I]** and **[II]**. It is obscure whether only **[I]** is the main thesis of **MR** and it *implies* **[II]**, or **MR** is the *conjunction* of **[I]** and **[II]**. For him, it does not make much difference, for, if **[II]** is false, **MR** is false whichever interpretation we take. If **[II]** is the implication of **[I]**, i.e. **MR**, and **[II]** is false, by *modus tollens*, **[I]** is also false. On the other hand, if **MR** is the conjunction of **[I]** and **[II]** and **[II]** is false, **MR** is also false. As we can see from his work, he established internal realism by denying **[II]**. He calls such denial of **[II]** *conceptual relativity*, i.e. there can be more than one true and complete description of reality. To determine whether ϕ is real, we must first specify the theory/language/conceptual scheme we employ. While only particles and energy are real *in the language of physics*, a table is equally real *in our commonsense language*. In other words, what is real is relative to a specific theory/language/conceptual scheme. Therefore, it does not make any sense to talk about any "object" independent of any viewpoint.

What, then, is the difference between internal realism and relativism, which Putnam himself reject forcefully? Why is such position *realism* at all? According to him, though what there really is is "version-relative"[152], once we have specified our version, there is only one true answer and it is not *determined* by me or our culture:

> Once we make clear how we are using 'object' (or 'exist'), the question 'How many objects exist?' has an answer that is not at all a matter of 'convention'. That is why I say that this sort of example does not support radical cultural relativism. Our concepts may be culturally relative, but it does not follow that the truth or falsity of everything we say using those concepts is simply 'decided' by the culture.[153]

[151] Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, p. 49.
[152] Putnam, *The Many Faces of Realism*, p.19.
[153] Ibid, p. 20.

This last remark betrays the problem with Putnam's internal realism. If our concepts *are*[154] culturally relative, how can it be that the truth or falsity of everything we say using those concepts is not decided by the culture? What else can play a role in deciding it? It cannot be any brute fact which is independent of any conceptual scheme, for Putnam himself denies it. The fact that truth and falsity is not wholly arbitrary (since it is regulated by the specific the conceptual scheme) does not make such position any less relativistic. Most people will agree that whether what we say is true is not wholly arbitrary but regulated by the fundamental beliefs embodied in our culture. In fact, the most controversial issue about relativism is precisely that any justification seems to run up ultimately against a particular set of fundamental beliefs inherent in a particular culture, which seems to be incommensurable with those of the other. That is what cultural relativism really means. Though presented as the middle ground between relativism and metaphysical realism, Putnam's internal realism is just relativism in a realist disguise. As a result, it is not clear how he can escape his own criticism against relativism.

Moreover, Putnam's refutation of metaphysical realism is grounded on a serious misunderstanding. He illegitimately imports **[II]** into **MR**. Though it is true that all advocators of **MR** hold **[I]**, it is not obvious that they also need to hold **[II]**. First of all, Putnam's distinction between metaphysical (external) and internal realism presupposes that reality must be understandable/conceivable/describable to us (so there is one *complete description*). He then seems to have confused metaphysical realism with *scientific* realism, taking what is objectively real as what can be asserted to be real by physics. Only against such background could he justifies his formulation (i.e. only *one* true and complete description, namely physics) and hence the rejection (i.e. there are other equally true and complete descriptions) of **MR**. However, some metaphysical realists like Nagel (as Putnam would surely regard him to be) hold that there may not be, due to our limited conceptual capability, any *complete description* of reality as a whole.

[154] Given his argument above, I don't see how he can consistently accept the possibility of concepts not

What is real may never be known, conceivable or describable by *us*. Secondly, for the part of independent reality which we can describe, there need not be just one true and complete description for it. In characterizing internal realism, Putnam writes:

> Internal realism is, at bottom, just the insistence that realism is *not* incompatible with conceptual relativity. One can be *both* a realist *and* a conceptual relativist.[155]

However, even a metaphysical realist can admit the phenomenon of conceptual relativity. What he essentially claims is only **[I]**, i.e. reality is *viewpoint-independent*, which is a metaphysical claim about the *ontological status* of reality. It is in no way incompatible with the claim that we can *describe* the same reality in different ways, with different languages or from different viewpoints. Accepting **[II]** does nothing to undermine **[I]** as Putnam thinks. We can illustrate this point with an example given by John Searle. That we can say that a man weighs 73 in kilograms *and* 160 in pounds does not render the *weight* of the man in any sense dependent on or determined by the scale we choose to employ[156]. To deduce from the obvious fact that a *description* of ϕ is relative to a set of linguistic categories to the striking conclusion that the *existence* of ϕ *described* is relative to a set of linguistic categories is to commit what Searle calls the use-mention fallacy[157]. We simply have no reason to attach **[II]** to **MR**, whether as an implication or as a component; it is simply irrelevant to **MR**.

Therefore, we can conclude that while internal realism is not essentially distinguishable from relativism, metaphysical realism is not necessarily incompatible with the phenomenon of conceptual relativity (which

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relative to a specific culture.

[155] Putnam, *The Many Faces of Realism*, p. 17.

[156] John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*, p. 165.

[157] "If we try to take these arguments as counting against ER [external realism], we commit a massive use-mention fallacy: From the fact that a description can only be made relative to a set of linguistic categories, it does not follow that the facts/objects/states of affairs,/etc., described can only exist relative to a set of categories", in Searle, p. 166. Simon Blackburn raises a similar doubt, see his "Enchanting Views", in *Putnam and His Critics*, p. 13–30. In the final chapter of this book, Putnam gives a response which, in my opinion, is weak and slippery, trying to avoid rather than face the charge. See chapter 10 "Comments and Replies", especially p.248-251.

Putnam considers to be the main defect of it), and hence we have no ground to accept the former and reject the latter.

Above all, internal realism, as a subjective interpretation of the idea of objective reality, is condemned to fail because we simply cannot give up the idea of objective reality. According to Nagel, in speculating about world, we cannot but begin from the idea that there is some way the world is and understand any plausible theory as providing a candidate for what the world is in itself:

> We do not get to the idea of how the world is from the appearances; rather, we begin with that idea, since the appearances from which we start are ways in which the world appears to *be*. We may decide after reflection and further observation that some of these are *mere* appearances, that the world is not like that after all. But this always represents a modification in our view of the world, based on alternative possibilities and reasons for preferring some of them to others. What we cannot avoid is the idea that something is the case, even if we don't know what it is.[158]

Even the hypothesis "the world is nothing but what is perceived by me", if it is sensible at all, must be understood as advancing the idea that the world we used to consider to consist of various people and objects external to me is *in fact* a world which consists of only me and my perception. Such hypothesis, nevertheless, is not about me but the way the world, which contains (or is even identical with) me, is *in itself*. Accordingly, internal realism can only be understood as a hypothesis proposing that what we used to think to be an objective world is *in fact* a product of our viewpoint, and such a proposal is sensible only if we take it as representing what is really the case. The metaphor "the mind and the world jointly make up the mind and the world"[159], if it is intelligible at all, can only be a metaphor of what the world is in itself.

It is sure that we can and do always discover what we used to think to be the case turns out to be unreal. The world as it is in itself may contain

[158] *LW*, p. 81.
[159] Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, p. xi.

much less than we have thought. However, such doubt cannot be applied to the whole realm of objective reality, i.e. we cannot reject the idea altogether. We cannot occupy a position from which we can make such claim intelligibly. To make sense of the assertion "ϕ is only real relative to **P**", we cannot but admit that this represents what is objectively the case. If fact, any assertion we made, any belief we endorse commit us to this claim either explicitly or implicitly. It is how we naturally consider our thought to be and any alternative seems implausible. The idea of objective reality, in this light, is simply another instance of unrevisable intuitive belief.

4

THE CONFLICT

In the above discussion, we have examined the three fundamental concepts of Nagel's philosophy: intuition, viewpoint and reality. We have explained what Nagel's trust of intuition means and why it is rational. Then we have examined three undeniable intuitive facts:

① As reflective beings, we can view the world and ourselves from both a more subjective and a relatively more objective view.

② There is subjective fact, i.e. a part of reality which is essentially connected to viewpoints.

③ Reality as a whole is independent of any viewpoint.

According to Nagel, ① to ③ represent our beliefs of three intuitive facts that we cannot sensibly doubt or deny, and we must acknowledge them no matter what specific theory of reality – of what there really is and what we really should do – we endorse. It does not mean that they are foundational in the sense that all other beliefs can be derived from and/or justified by them. They are, however, still of great importance. On the one hand, they provide a simple test for the credibility of any theory about what there is and what we should do. Since they are undeniable, theories fail to acknowledge these facts are necessarily wrong. In fact, it is how Nagel argues for his specific reformulation of philosophical problems[160]. On the other hand, they provide the elements from which Nagel can construct a coherent and persuasive account of the common source of philosophical problems. In this chapter, I

[160] For a brief account of this approach, see 4.3.

will, basing on our preceding discussion about intuition, viewpoints and reality, elucidate Nagel's central claim that the deepest common source of all philosophical problems is ultimately the conflict between the subjective and the objective viewpoint. I will begin with an explication of the two subjective-objective distinctions underlining Nagel's theory. Then, I will examine the nature of the conflict – what it involves, how it arises and what its significance is.

4.1 Subjective and Objective Reconsidered

From the above discussion, we learn that the distinction between subjective and objective is crucial for Nagel. The distinction, however, is drawn differently regarding viewpoint and reality. Indeed, what is most difficult to grasp and thus appreciate in Nagel's philosophy is his deliberate employment of the distinction between subjective and objective in a variety of senses. Basically, there are *two* related but distinct subjective-objective distinctions. Nagel himself has never given any explicit clarification of the two distinctions, and without a proper understanding of this distinction, we are in no position to appreciate the force of Nagel's reformulation of traditional philosophical problems. I believe it could be a source of misunderstanding and hence underestimation of his claim about the conflict between the subjective and the objective viewpoint as the fundamental source of all philosophical problems. Therefore, before discussing the nature of the conflict, I will first give an elucidation of the two subjective-objective distinctions in this section.

"Subjective" and "objective" may be two of the most frequently used adjective Nagel employs in his writing. Generally speaking, the distinction is of a relative nature and is drawn according to the level of *detachment*. **A** is more objective than **B** if and only if **A** is more detached than **B**, and **B** is more subjective than **A** if and only if **B** is less detached than **A**, where **A** and **B** can be two viewpoints, views, conceptions, facts, properties and kinds of reality. Though the same terms are used, they are used in quite different ways. To be more precise, since there are two different senses of "detachment," there are

two different ways of drawing the distinction between the subjective and the objective.

In describing viewpoints, views and conceptions, subjective and objective are employed in the *epistemological* sense, referring to the *mode of understanding*, i.e. how something is understood. Here, detachment means detachment from the particularity of the viewer *in viewing an object*. Primarily, the distinction is employed in qualifying our *methods of understanding* and their resulting conceptions[161]. If we try to understand an object by detaching as far as possible from the particularity of any viewpoint, we are adopting the objective method. If, on the other hand, we try to make sense of the specific content of a view by deliberately committing to and exploiting as far as possible the specific viewpoint from which the view is derived, we are using the subjective method.

An objective conception of **O**, which is obtained by *objective detachment*, does not care about how **O** appears to any particular viewpoint but aspires to discard the influence of the particularity of the viewer as far as possible in order to reveal the real nature of **O**, i.e. how **O** is *in itself*. Regarding an object **O**, a view **VO[n]** is more objective than another view **VO[n-1]** if and only if it is viewed from a more objective viewpoint **P[n]**, which commits less to the particularity of the viewer, and includes in it both **VO[n-1]** and the viewpoint **P[n-1]** from which **VO[n-1]** is derived. **VO[n-1]**, in this case, is more subjective than **VO[n]**. Here, we should always remember one very important point. Both **VO[n]** and **VO[n-1]** *claim* to represent reality in intent, though it may turn out that **VO[n-1]** should be revised or even abandoned in the light of **VO[n]**[162]. Accordingly, an objective conception always claims to be *the* conception of reality, which alone reveals what is really the case.

On the other hand, we can obtain a *subjective* conception of an object **O** through the method of subjective imagination. Such a subjective conception is different from the conception which is *revealed to be subjective*

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[161] "Objectivity is a method of understanding. It is beliefs and attitudes that are objective in the primary sense," in *VFN*, p. 4.

[162] Physical science is such an enterprise. It aims at representing the world from an absolutely detached viewpoint so that an *absolute conception of reality*, which is free from any subjective influence, can be formed. For the idea of absolute conception of reality, see Bernard Williams' *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry*, pp. 64-68.

by objective detachment, in that it is a deliberate attempt to make sense of the specific content of how something appears to a certain viewpoint by actively taking up the viewpoint. Notice that what it claims to represent is just *how* ***O*** *appears to the viewpoint*. Such conception may or may not represent the real nature of **O**. The point, however, is that it is simply not its concern, and, given the possibility of distortion, it is impotent to guarantee that what it represents is the reality of **O**. This point can be illustrated with the following examples. When I try to understand how grasses taste to a sheep, I have to engage in subjective imagination, by taking up its viewpoint. Suppose it is possible and I do succeed in doing so. What I can know is only that how grasses taste to a sheep. Whether it represents the real nature of grass is neither my concern here nor what can be guaranteed by our subjective approach. Or we can consider the case of anthropological understanding of the behaviours of a culture different from ours. Suppose you encounter a tribe whose members never chop down any trees in their habitat but kill all the snakes they find. In order to understand their behaviours, you have to take up their viewpoint and try to understand the vast body of beliefs they endorse. In this case, you may discover that they do so because they believe that every tree is inhabited by a spirit which protects them and that snakes feed on these spirits. You can never make sense of their behaviour from your own point of view or a detached standpoint without engaging in subjective imagination, exploiting their worldview in your understanding. The fact that you can now form a subjective conception of how the world appears to the members of the community and hence understand the meaning of their behaviours, however, does *nothing* to guarantee that their worldview represents reality in itself. It is of course possible that there are really spirits living in the trees and that snakes really eat these spirits, but that is not what a subjective conception is supposed to tell.

Besides characterizing our mode of understanding, Nagel also employs the subjective-objective distinction in the *metaphysical* sense, referring to the *mode of being*, i.e. how something *is*, when it is used to qualify objects, facts, properties and reality. Here, detachment refers to the *detachment of an object from a viewpoint*. Generally speaking, a fact is

objective if and only if it *is* in no way related to any viewpoint, and is subjective if and only if it *is* essentially related to a viewpoint. From this general characterization, it seems that in regard to facts, the distinction between subjective and objective should be all-or-nothing. It seems that it "makes no sense (in this sense) to say that the distinction between subjective and objective *facts* is a matter of degree: facts either involve consciousness or they do not."[163] It is, however, at odd with Nagel's claim that we may "think of reality as a set of concentric spheres, progressively revealed as we detach gradually from the contingencies of the self."[164] Should we abandon Nagel's bizarre view?

In my opinion, there is an interpretation of Nagel's claim that will make it much more plausible. The key point is to take the distinction of subjective and objective as being applied *within the realm of subjective reality*. We have distinguished two senses of "being independent of any viewpoint," and hence two senses of "objective". In the strict sense, what is objective is what is *in no way related to any viewpoint*, while, in the loose sense, it refers to objects *whose existence does not require any viewer to view it* (see 3.1). Accordingly, we can intelligibly assert that subjective facts are *objective in the loose sense* that their existence is independent of their being viewed by a further viewer, though they are *not objective in the strict sense* since they are essentially connected to viewpoints.[165]

To avoid confusion, let's replace "objective" (in the metaphysical sense) in the loose sense with "real" and retain the word to what is objective in the strict sense, i.e. in no way related to any viewpoint. Accordingly, **O** is *real* is if and only if its existence does not consist in its being viewed by any viewers. **O** is *subjectively real*, if and only if it is essentially connected to viewpoints but its existence does not consist in its being viewed by any

[163] Colin Mcginn, "Nagel: The View From Nowhere", p. 90.

[164] *VFN*, p. 5. Mcggin has also pointed it out, but he only complains that Nagel does not sufficiently warn us against such confusion, see "Nagel: The View From Nowhere", p. 90.

[165] One peculiar instance of this kind of fact is the existence of viewpoints. No one can deny that there is viewpoint because the very denial itself implies its existence. This fact is, of course, subjective, for it essentially connects to viewpoints, but it is simultaneously a fact in the objective order, i.e. any viewpoint is a *viewpoint in the world*. Though each viewpoint can generate and make up its own world, the viewpoint itself must be situated in the objective world. Suppose everything in the world owns their existence to my viewpoint. In this case, I am the God, but this absolute viewpoint must still be objective in the loose sense. In other words, even if the world contains only me and my imagination

viewers. Finally, **O** is *objectively real* if and only if it is in no way related to any viewpoint *and* exists independently of its being viewed. On this level, the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity is all-or-nothing: **O** is either objectively real or subjectively real. It makes no sense to say a thing or a fact is more subjective or objective than another is.

However, that two objects are both subjectively real does not entail that they are *equally* subjective. Though they are both essentially related to a certain viewpoint (thus subjective), they can be related to it to a different degree. That is, it may be the case that one of the object is related to a viewpoint which consists of elements less specific to the particular viewer than the other. If there is something which is essentially related to the particularity of a specific viewer, it is *more subjective* than one which is essentially related to a human point of view. This would in turn be more subjective than another object or fact which is essentially related to the viewpoint of reflective beings in general. That means, within the realm of subjective reality, there may be some facts which are *more detached* from the particularity of a certain viewer than others. Conceived in this way, this is absolutely intelligible to say that some portions of reality are *more objective* (or subjective) than the others.

From the above discussion, we can see the complexity of Nagel's conception of subjectivity and objectivity. As we will see, the interplay between the epistemological and the metaphysical subjectivity and objectivity plays an essential role in Nagel's theory of the nature of our philosophical puzzlement.

4.2 The Nature of the Conflict

This section will be divided into two parts. In 4.21, I will give a general picture of what a world with reflective beings like us is like and how this gives rise to the possibility of any conflict between the subject and objective viewpoints. Then, I will explicate the nature of this conflict in detail in 4.22.

(or creation), it is what the world is *in itself*, not for me or any other viewpoints.

4.21 The General Picture of the World

We human beings, like any other things, exist in an independent world, which as a whole is not the product of any viewpoint. However, we are distinct from other things in the world in that we are *conscious*. To be conscious is to view (i.e. perceive and/or conceive) the world and form a view **V** (perception and/or conception) of it from a particular viewpoint **P** (i.e. a particular set of – spatio-temporal, physical, psychological, cultural and historical - pre-conditions). Furthermore, unlike other animals, we are capable of *self-consciousness*. That is, we are not only conscious of some object (which appears to me in a specific way) but also *the very conscious act of viewing*, and we are always able to recall that it is me who had or is having an awareness of the object.

Besides *perceiving*, we are also capable of *conceptual thinking*, a power which enables us to form *beliefs*. It makes our view of the world different essentially from that of other merely-perceptual beings: our view is made up of *a set of beliefs about the world*. The set of beliefs constitutes our *understanding* or the *conception* of the world and ourselves. These beliefs have a built-in *objective claim*, which always claim to represent the world *as it really is*, i.e. independent of any particular viewpoint. In holding a belief, we cannot but take it as representing *what is really the case*. To believe that there is a guitar beside me is to believe that it is not just an appearance to me, but *a real fact*. To say that I believe there *is* a guitar beside me *but* it is *just* what appears to me to be the case is either to talk nonsense or to deny the former belief. It amounts to saying that our view of the world always *claims* to represent the world as it really is in itself.

Though all our beliefs have, at least, an implicit objective claim, it may turn out that some of our beliefs are false. With our self-consciousness, we may discover that what we once thought to be really the case represents only what the world *appears to us* in a particular manner *because of* our specific constitution. Once we are aware of it, this possibility is enough to undermine our confidence in our beliefs and we begin to doubt their objective claim. In order to keep a belief, we demands a *justification* for it, which should show

that our view represents not only what is the case for us but also what is the case *in itself*. It naturally draws our attention back to our viewpoint – our spatial position first, then our physical and psychological constitution and finally our cultural and historical background. While these factors are the preconditions that enable us to form the view we have about the world, they also limit, at least partly, what this view can be. The recognition of this fact generates the need to *examine* all these factors from a more detached point of view so that any distortion due to our specific personal condition can be discarded:

> The object [of objective detachment] is to discount for the features of our pre-reflective outlook that make things appear to us as they do, and thereby to reach an understanding of things as they really are. We flee the subjective under the pressure of an assumption that everything must be something not to any point of view, but in itself.[166]

That means our self-consciousness is more than just a form of perception. With our conceptual capability, we are able to examine ourselves and articulate the relation between our view and viewpoint. In this sense, we are *reflective* beings. As reflective beings, we can always conceive the world and ourselves from a relatively more objective viewpoint. We take our viewpoint and view as the object of a higher level of reflective consciousness. In this act of reflecting, we try to detach as much as possible from our particularity and aim at regarding "the world as centerless, with the viewer as just one of its content"[167]. Through this process of detachment, we hope to achieve a comprehensive understanding of what the world is in itself. The former view and the corresponding viewpoint, from this more detached, *objective* standpoint, is now shown to be more *subjective*, in the sense that it commits more to our particularity[168].

At first glance, this more detached objective viewpoint seems to be superior and more reliable. As mentioned above, reality as a whole is

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[166] "Subjective and Objective," in *MQ*, p. 208.

[167] Ibid., p. 206. Here, Nagel only took the belief that "everything must be something not to any point of view, but in itself" as an *assumption*. However, as we have discussed in chapter 3, he now claims that it is *rationally undeniable*.

[168] Here, the distinction between "subjective" and "objective" is used in an *epistemological* sense as

independent of any viewpoint. How can the world, in which we found ourselves, contains any feature which is accessible *only to us*? If there are really rocks in the world, what they *are* must be different from what they *appear to us*. If a rock exists independent of any viewers, a true view of it must be one which is free from any influence of any viewpoint. If it looks grey only when it is perceived under a certain kind of light by a certain type of viewer, it is reasonable to assume that it is grey not in itself but only in relation to a specific viewpoint. Since how something appears to a viewer is inevitably affected by the nature of his viewpoint, it seems that the most reliable way to achieve a precise and comprehensive view of the world in itself is to eliminate the influence of his viewpoint as much as possible. Accordingly, a viewpoint is necessarily *distorting*. As a result, the less a view relies on the particularity of the viewer – i.e. the more objective the view, - the more reliable it is as a representation of what is really the case. Therefore, we should modify, correct or even abandon our former, more subjective beliefs.

It seems to make perfect sense when what we are considering are some physical things, or the physical aspect of things. If there is any physical (aspect of) thing at all, it must be something independent of any viewpoint[169]. It means that any true understanding of physical things must be (in the strict sense) objective, i.e. understanding without essentially referring to any viewpoint. However, we have seen that there is also *subjective (in the metaphysical sense) reality*, i.e. the part of reality which is essentially connected to viewpoints. The viewpoints, in relation to this kind of fact, are *constitutive*, i.e. they give rise to or are a part of these facts. We have already seen how it is compatible with the claim that reality as a whole is independent of any viewpoint and a proper understanding of it make reference to them essentially (see section 3.2). This means that there are two irreducible regions of reality: the objective and the subjective.

What has just been said, of course, does not mean that we have a unified and comprehensive *conception* of reality as a whole. To put it in

attributes to "view" and "viewpoint." See 4.1 above.

[169] It may be said that, as suggested by Nagel's dual aspect theory, physical things can also be related to viewpoints. If it is the case, it is not clear why we should call these things physical at all. It would invite less confusion if we describe these things as having both a physical and a perspectival aspect.

Putnam's terminology, the fact that we do have the *concepts* of "reality", "subjective reality" and "objective reality" does not entail that we also have a clear *conception* about them[170]. So far, all we know is only that there is a real world with both subjective and objective facts and the general characterization of them. We, however, have not specified what facts, subjective or objective, are real and what their characteristics are. To have a comprehensive understanding of reality, we have to form a coherent *conception* – i.e. a set of beliefs – of reality, of a world in which we reflective human beings find ourselves. Nagel has never provided such a unified conception. In fact, one of his claims is that "often the pursuit of a highly unified conception of life and the world leads to philosophical mistakes – to false reductions or to the refusal to recognize part of what is real". Why is it the case? If it is true that we can make sense of the concept of subjective and objective reality, why can't we achieve a unified conception of reality? What is a unified conception of reality? Here, we finally come to the central claim of Nagel: we cannot not achieve a unified conception of reality because of our reflective nature, i.e. the very fact that we can and do occupy two different – the subjective and the objective -viewpoints in viewing the same object, and at some point, the resulting views are conflicting. What does it mean?

4.22 The Conflict

In "Subjective and Objective", Nagel, for the first time, formulated what he considers to be the central problem of philosophy – in the sense that it is the common source of all philosophical problems – in the following passage:

> The problem is one of opposition between subjective and

[170] "When we translate a word as, says, *temperature* we equate the reference and, to the extent that we stick to our translation, the sense of the translated expression with that of our own term 'temperature', at least as we use it in that context... In this sense we equate the 'concept' in question with our own 'concept' of temperature. But so doing is compatible with the fact that the seventeenth-century scientists, or whoever, may have had a different *conception* of temperature, that is a different set of beliefs about it and its nature than we do, different 'images of knowledge', and different ultimate beliefs about many other matters as well", see Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, p. 117. In the original context, Putnam is discussing the Kuhn's incommensurability thesis and charging him as confusing concept with conception.

> objective points of view. There is a tendency to seek an objective account of everything before admitting its reality. But often what appears to a more subjective point of view cannot be accounted for in this way. So either the objective conception of the world is incomplete, or the subjective involves illusions that should be rejected.[171]

Later, he devotes a whole book, *The View from Nowhere*, to tackle the aforementioned problem, namely "how to combine the perspective of a particular person inside the world with an objective view of that same world, the person and his viewpoint included"[172]. This, according to Nagel, is a problem that "faces every creature with the impulse and the capacity to transcend its particular point of view and to conceive of the world as a whole". If what Nagel says is true, philosophical problems are unavoidable to all reflective beings and hence justified as real problems for us.

In the last section, we have delineated the general picture of what the world with reflective beings is like. It contains both subjective and objective facts, and beings that reflect upon it. Reflection, as we have discussed in 2.2, is the conscious attempt of revealing, clarifying, explicating and justifying one's viewpoint and hence the view from which it arises from a more detached viewpoint. It is driven by our *awareness* of the possibility that our particular beliefs may not represent what the world really is and our *impulse* to understand the world as it is. Since many of our beliefs are about the external world, we, in trying to achieve a true understanding of the world, naturally regard our viewpoints as distorting and try to form a view that is as detached as possible. Such advance in objectivity is proved to be a great success in physical science, which has the physical world (or the physical aspect of the world) as its object. As the physical world is an *objective* world independent of any viewpoint, it is tempting to draw the conclusion that it alone is the *real* world. Here, "physical" is taken as the synonym of "objective", which is in turns understood as "real". Accordingly, anything which is not physical, such as mental states and values, is at most only appearance of something

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[171] "Subjective and Objective", in *MQ*, p. 196.

[172] *VFN*, p. 3. Since the theme of this essay is the foundation of Nagel's reformulation of traditional philosophical problems, I would not discuss issues concerning the reconciliation of the conflict.

objective and not part of reality. It seems to follow that the only reliable method of understanding reality is objective detachment, which aspires to leave *any* viewpoint behind.

However, we have seen that the equation among "physical", "objective" and "real" is unjustified. What is real admits subjective elements and what is objective need not be physical. It leaves room for the method of *subjective imagination* in our understanding of the world. To understand the view **VO** of a viewer **X** about an object **O**, one must take into account of and, at least to a sufficient extent, *take up* the specific viewpoint **P** that gives rise to it and try to understand **VO** from within. An objective account of an alien view is sure to leave much out and cannot do much to advance our understanding. Though **VO** may not really represent what **O** is, *the fact that **O** appears to **V** as **VO** is real as an appearance*. If appearance is part of reality and our aim is to understand everything real, subjective imagination is surely indispensable and irreplaceable.

Up till now, it seems that it goes perfectly smooth and there is not any conflict at all. It is true that we can understand the same object **O** from two viewpoints of different levels of objectivity, forming two different views. They are surely different, for they commit to a different degree to the particularity of the viewer. We can also admit that, if the object of our understanding is the world as a whole, both objective detachment and subjective imagination are partial. It, however, does not mean that the two methods, and hence the two views, are *conflicting*, since the purposes that drive us to employ the two different methods of understanding are different. We employ objective detachment in order to understand the aspect of the world which is independent of any viewpoint. Though it may be able to accommodate the existence of views and viewpoints in the objective (in the sense of being real) order under appropriate interpretation[173], it surely leaves out the *content* or the "most specific qualities"[174] of these subjective facts, which can only be

[173] "The aim was to place perspectives and their contents in a world seen from no particular point of view", in *VFN*, p. 25.
[174] Ibid.

adequately understood from the corresponding viewpoints[175]. However, such an understanding can be *supplemented* by subjective imagination, which aims at *making sense of the content of the view as an appearance*. Whether the view represents the real world as it is in itself is, at least in this case, not its concern. In other words, we can say that while objective detachment concerns about what there really is the case, subjective imagination is employed to understand what the particular content – phenomenological *qualia* in the case of perception and particular claims and beliefs in the case of conception (says, conceptions of freedom and value) - of a view is. Consider the case of colour:

> Instead of conceiving the world as full of colored objects, we conceive it as full of objects with primary qualities that affect human vision in certain subjectively understandable ways. The distinction between appearance and objective reality becomes the object of a new, mixed understanding that combines subjective and objective elements and that is based on recognition of the limits of objectivity. Here there is no conflict.[176]

In other words, if detachment can take all objective facts into account and imagination can specify the content of all subjective facts, they together should form a comprehensive and unified conception of the world as it is. Certainly, we have not achieved and are not likely to achieve such a comprehensive view. We may even follow Nagel to admit that the best view we can ever achieve will still leave out a vast portion of reality, given the limitation in our conceptual capacity in conceiving both the objective aspect of the world and the subjective content of some unimaginable kinds of mind. Nonetheless, there is still not the slightest sign of conflict between the

[175] "There are limits of objectivity as a form of understanding that follow from the fact that it leaves the subjective behind. These are inner limits. There are also outer limits of objectivity that fall at different points for different types of beings, and that depend not on the nature of objectivity but on how far it can be pursued by a given individual. Objectivity is only a way of extending one's grasp of the world, and besides leaving certain aspects of reality behind, it may fail to reach others, even if more powerful forms of objectivity could encompass them", in *VFN*, p. 99.

[176] The example is supplied by Nagel, see *VFN*, p. 87

subjective and the objective viewpoint or view[177].

When do such conflict occur? It occurs when:

> ...something appears to require subjective and objective conceptions that cover the same territory, and that cannot be combined into a single complex but consistent view. *This is particularly likely with respect to our understanding of ourselves*, and it is at the source of some of the most difficult problems of philosophy, including the problems of personal identity, free will, and the meaning of life.[178]

What Nagel means is quite clear. It is *not* the case that the subjective and the objective viewpoints *always* clash. When what we are concerned are objective facts, the objective view should always be dominant and the subjective view serves only as a supplement of the specific qualities of our view about these facts as appearances. It is obvious in the case of colour. Pre-reflectively, we believe that colour is a quality of external objects. On reflection, we discover that it is in fact a product of both the external world and its effects on our sensory organs. With this discovery, we modify our former view and form a new picture of the world in which colour is considered to be a secondary quality of the external objects. While the subjective viewpoint is indispensable in understanding the specific quality of colour, i.e. what a particular colour is like for a particular viewer, it does nothing to challenge the claim of the objective viewpoint because ontologically, objective facts are neither constituted by nor related to any viewpoint. That means, with regard to an objective object **O**, we can reconcile the two viewpoints by insisting that the objective view should dominate over the subjective, representing the true nature of **O**, while admitting that **O** does appear to the viewer as **VO** from **P**. There is no resistance from the subjective viewpoint.

Nevertheless, when our understanding turns back to *ourselves*, to the nature of reflective beings that understand and view from their viewpoint, the

[177] This is the question raised by Vinit Haksar. He tries to argue that "the most that we are entitled to claim is that the objective picture is incomplete, in need of supplementation". See his "Nagel on Subjective and Objective," in *Inquiry* 24, 105-121.
[178] *VFN*, p. 87. my italics.

situation is far more complicated. We are not only able to view objective facts but can also form self-conception of ourselves. It is certain that some aspects of us – our physical constitution, physiological structure and biological development - can be accounted for objectively without referring to any viewpoint. However, it is equally obvious that we are reflective beings, whose reflective nature is revealed in two aspects. On the one hand, we are *reflective thinkers* who aspire to understand reality and are capable of reflecting upon the pre-conditions which give rise to our belief. We can and do examine which beliefs are endorsed out of ignorance and prejudice, and which are grounded on reasons. On the other hand, we are *reflective agents* who act according to our will and are able to reflect upon the motives and principles according to which we act. We can and do examine whether what we take to be reasons for our action are in fact disguised bias and prejudice.

As in the case of objective facts, how we appear to ourselves may be distorted by the particularity of our viewpoint and hence may not represent our real nature. Our awareness of this demands us to reflect further to achieve an undistorted view of ourselves by objective detachment, leaving as much particularity as possible. Given our aim of understanding the real nature of ourselves and we are just part of the objective world, such a demand seems perfectly reasonable. Accordingly, it seems that we should accept an objective view of ourselves as the only real picture. While it may not be actually accomplished, we should take it as our ideal.

However, things do not go so smoothly this time. "The trouble occurs when the objective view encounters something, revealed subjectively, that it cannot accommodate."[179] Some of the most essential features – mind, freedom, meaning of life, value and reason - of reflective beings are unaccountable in objective terms, while, unlike colour, they claim to be more than just *appearance* but *reality in itself*, and it is at this point the two viewpoints clash.

The conflict is most obviously revealed in our attempt to conceive our minds. We all have a natural impulse of understanding the world. We are not

[179] "Subjective and Objective," in *MQ*, p. 210.

satisfied with just knowing what there is but further demand a comprehensive understanding of its characteristics. We all admit that there is consciousness, but we don't know its exact nature. Is it just an instance of objective fact, or something irreducibly subjective? First of all, it seems, as Nagel argues, that whatever there is must be objective, in the sense that it is located in the objective order. Even subjective facts are objective in this loose sense if it is real. What then do we need to know to achieve an adequate understanding of consciousness? Different answers are available, depending on how objectivity is understood. If the objective view is the only view to be trusted and the only form of an objective view is the physical one, consciousness can only be something physical. A mental process, (says pain), which seems to involve essentially the fact what it is like to be **X**, is simply the *appearance* of something more fundamental, namely a physical process (says C-fibre firing). A physical account of the nature of consciousness is exhaustive and no reference to any viewpoint is required. In other words, if we understand the physical nature of consciousness, we understand everything real about it. Of course, one endorses the objective view of consciousness need not accept the *physicalist* account above. He may argue that though mental process should be something objective, it need not be identified with any physical process. What is important is that all mental processes (says, pain) tend to produce behaviors – verbal and non-verbal actions and reactions that are objectively observable and understandable (says shouting when being hurt, moving away from the fire that burns me, etc.). Mental process, in this sense, is only the tendency to behave in certain ways. According to such a *behaviourist* account, once we have specified the totality of *action-tendency* of a man, we have fully described his consciousness.

The common Pan-objectivist assumption of all these reductionist theories[180] is that everything real is objective and can be objectively understood. Accordingly, consciousness, if it is something real, can be understood exhaustively by some objective means. The assumption is attractive because it is in accord with the belief that what is real is objective, and it guarantees that we can have an *exhaustive understanding* of

[180] Other examples are functionalism and eliminative materialism.

consciousness and hence the world. If consciousness involves something essentially subjective, its real nature and its specific quality cannot be understood objectively and it cannot occupy a place in the objective order.

The fatal mistake of Pan-objectivism is that it tries to understand consciousness as independent of viewpoints. It is condemned to fail since consciousness is essentially link to viewpoints. The recognition of this even drives some philosophers to deny its existence[181]. We have discussed why Pan-objectivism is wrong in 3.2. We have to admit that consciousness is real and its distinct features – its phenomenological properties - can only be understood subjectively. Objective and subjective facts are irreducible to each other. It seems tempting to draw the conclusion that while objective facts should only be understood objectively, subjective facts like consciousness should only be conceived subjectively and there is *still* no obvious conflict between the two viewpoints. Instead, the subjective and the objective *conception* of ourselves are *complementary* to each other.

> ...if we reject the mind-brain identity theory, as Nagel and Kripke do, then the subjectivist's claim will not conflict with the objectivist approach, but rather be complementary to it – the objectivist approach would study brain-states, the subjectivist approach would be needed to study the inner mental states. In any case, even if the mind-brain identity theory were true, what this would show is that the subjectivist approach is in principle redundant, it would not show that the two approaches would be in collision.[182]

From the discussion of the various distinctions between subjectivity and objectivity, we are in a better position to evaluate Nagel's claim about the clash between them. Our reflection upon our consciousness aims at discovering its real nature. For example, in studying the phenomenon of pain, what we want to know is what pain really is, i.e. what is *really* happening when I feel pain. Though the subjective character of pain can only be conceived by taking up the corresponding viewpoint subjectively, a subjective conception, in this case, fails to give us what we want. For those who are able to share our

[181] It is the strategy of Daniel Dennett's *Consciousness Explained* and Paul Churchland's *Matter and Consciousness*.
[182] Vinit Haksar, "Nagel on Subjective and Objective", p. 106.

viewpoint, they certainly know what pain feel to us. But what can they say about our pain? All they can say is that pain is *this* kind of feeling for us, and it clearly explains nothing about pain. It is precisely such dissatisfaction which drives so many philosophers to adopt a reductionist account of consciousness. Though it is a groundless over-reaction, it is understandable. A genuine explanation of the reality of pain must be, at least, to a certain extent, and in some sense, objective (epistemologically) since it is what claims to represents the reality from no particular point of view. It, then, seems that the best explanation for pain is that the feeling of pain is in reality the mere *appearance* of something objective (metaphysically) – certain action-tendency or brain states - to us. Here, the objective viewpoint claims dominance over the subjective one. The subjective viewpoint, however, resists, for it would amount to saying that pain is something not essentially related to any viewpoint, which is obviously wrong. Though we may not be able to specify the real nature of pain, the fact that pain is something subjectively real is undeniable.

The above discussion about the mind-body problem can be generalized. To begin with, the stalemate first lies in the contradiction between two equally undeniable facts. Firstly, there is, as we have established, subjective reality and it can only be understood subjectively. If we try to understand a subjective fact from the absolutely objective viewpoint, i.e. *the view from nowhere*, we are doomed to leave out what we want to understand. It means that while subjective reality must be acknowledged from the absolutely objective viewpoint, we can never specify its specific qualities without taking up the viewpoint. In this sense, due to the subjective nature of the object of understanding, the subjective viewpoint claims dominance over the objective one.

However, the subjective view is undermined by the insistence of a more objective one to claim dominance over it *even if* the fact that subjective facts should be understood subjectively is acknowledged. The fact that any exhaustive understanding of the real nature of subjective facts is subjective does not rule out the aforementioned possibility that what is revealed to a particular viewpoint may *merely* be appearance and not something real. We do sometimes find ourselves falsely "remember" something which we never

experience. Besides subjective facts, there are also subjective *illusions.* There is no guarantee that what we understand is *true*, representing the world as it is, unless it can be established from a more objective viewpoint. ,

Here, we can see how the conflict between the subjective and the objective arises and why it is so difficult to resolve. It arises in our attempt to understand the real nature of subjective reality. On the one hand, while the objective view is the correct view about what there really is, all it can achieve is at most the acknowledgment of the existence of subjective facts and it fails to provide any adequate account for them. On the other hand, while the subjective viewpoint is more appropriate in understanding subjective facts, it cannot guarantee what is revealed to it about itself is real and not illusive. However, it *cannot accept* the verdict that what is revealed to it, especially some features we consider to be central and essential to reflecting beings, is *mere appearance* either. They come to a total deadlock because both of them claim dominance over but are rejected by the other:

> The opposition between subjective and objective can arise at any place on the spectrum where one point of view claims dominance over another, more subjective one, and that claim is resisted.[183]

Such conflict, Nagel argues, underlines all philosophical problems. Consider the problem of free will[184]. Pre-reflectively, we take for granted that we as reflective agents are free, which is revealed in our sense of autonomy and responsibility. We naturally regard that we can and do act according to our will and hence should be responsible for what we have done. Suppose I go into a supermarket and buy a packet of *GG chocolate*. It is natural for me to regard this as my voluntary action, something I do out of my own decision. However, it may turn out that the real *cause* of my very act of buying is simply that I am persuaded or manipulated by its repetitious commercial advertisement unconsciously, together with my characteristics, my early environment and my genetic makeup over which I have no control. I only *seem to be free* from this pre-reflective viewpoint. That is not what I, as a

[183] "Subjective and Objective", in *MQ*, p. 206.

[184] See Nagel's "Moral Luck" and "Subjective and Objective" in *MQ*, and Chapter VII of *VFN*.

reflective agent, want. In order to ensure that what I do is free from any external manipulation, I begin to examine the motives and reasons involved in my decision. In order words, I am trying to examine my previous view from a more objective viewpoint. By this and only this objective detachment, I am able to ensure and increase my freedom by eliminating whatever I would not accept consciously and rationally and basing all my decision on my deliberate rational choice as far as possible.

Nevertheless, this objective detachment, if carried out too far, would undermine our sense of freedom. When viewed from a highly objective viewpoint, our actions are merely instances of events *happening* in the world. Whether they are causally determined is not the point. Even if it can be shown that determinism is wrong, it doesn't render the concept of free agency any more intelligible:

> ...free agency is not implied by the absence of determinism, even though it appears to be threatened by the presence of determinism. Uncaused acts are no more attributable to the agent than those caused by antecedent circumstances.[185]

Once our action is viewed objectively as an event, there is simply no room for our agency. Since the objective view presents itself as the correct view of reality, it seems reasonable to draw the conclusion that we only appear to ourselves to be free. It amounts to saying that our sense of autonomy and hence responsibility is just an *illusion* for us, even if it is an inevitable one. The relentless reliance on the objective view is expressed in various forms of determinism, whose central claim is that "there are laws of nature, like those that govern the movement of the planets, which govern everything that happens in the world – and that in accordance with those laws, the circumstances before an action determine that it will happen, and rule out any other possibility"[186].

Such a conclusion, however, is intuitively unacceptable, in that it contradicts with the very idea of reflective agency, the self-image that we are

[185] Vinit Haksar, "Nagel on Subjective and Objective", p. 106.
[186] *Mean*, pp. 51-52.

in no position to abandon. Though it is possible that many of our "actions" are indeed caused by some non-rational factors of which we are not conscious and have no control, and that sometimes we are wrong in attributing responsibility to ourselves or others, it seems impossible for us not to regard ourselves as reflective agents. Our reflective nature, that is, our ability to examine our previous viewpoint (in this case our desires and motives) from a more detached, objective viewpoint implies the practical question "what should I do?" whenever we act. Our awareness of the factors and preconditions that may have an influence on what we are going to do presses the question on us, and we simply have no choice but to make up my mind as to what to do, no matter what theory of freedom we accept. I may give up my choice and act simply according to my inclination or the majority view, but it is *my decision* nonetheless. Our freedom is, then, derived from and guaranteed by our reflective nature:

> We cannot evade our freedom. Once we have developed the capacity to recognize our own desires and motives, we are faced with the choice of whether to act as they incline us to act, and in facing that choice we are inevitably faced with an evaluative question. Even if we refuse to think about it, that refusal can itself be evaluated.[187]

In other words, the belief that we are free, that it is always up to me as to what to do, is an unrevisable intuition, a belief that we cannot question from a more objective position. Freedom must then be something real. Since there is no room for freedom from a totally detached viewpoint, the real nature of freedom must be conceived subjectively. The question is how subjective our conception of freedom should be. It cannot be too subjective. For example, we cannot be contended with the freedom we aware of on the pre-reflective level. As I have mentioned, it is always possible that we misidentify our freedom, taking the product of some external factors that are beyond my control as the outcome of our will. Therefore, it must be objective to a certain extent so that what is revealed is not merely illusion but something real about our freedom.

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[187] *LW*, p. 118.

The stalemate, as we could expect, is reached because we do not have any neutral position from which we can determine how subjective (or objective) our conception of freedom should be. As with all of the other philosophical problems, all that we know is simply that, in general, the true view about freedom is not located on the two extremes – the pre-reflective view or the view from nowhere – but somewhere in between. The problem, however, is that we cannot justify a resting place in the subjective-objective spectrum. As long as a certain position is adopted, we, driven by our reflective nature, cannot but ask, "is it really the case?" and try to form a more objective view. Up to a certain point, the detachment is resisted by the former more subjective view as being an inappropriate means of understanding the real nature of freedom. The claim of the objective viewpoint remains nonetheless and this renders the conflict intractable. In a word, the real problem of free will "stems from a clash between the view of action inside and *any* view of it from outside,"[188] which is perceived by us as "a bafflement of our feelings and attitudes – a loss of confidence, conviction or equilibrium."[189]

Other problems like the meaning of life[190], death[191], value[192], ethics[193], political theory[194], and knowledge[195] have the same underlying structure. Pre-reflectively, we take ourselves to be beings with certain characteristics. On reflection, some of them turn out to be illusion, representing only what we appear to ourselves to be and not what we really are. To obtain a more secured conception of ourselves, we detach more and more from our particularity so that distortion may be eliminated as far as possible. Such detachment, if practised relentlessly, may not always yield a result, since what we want to understand is the nature of reflective beings, who are essentially beings with viewpoints. At some point, the subjective view pulls back and resists a more objective one, but we do not know where to stop. While we can reasonably assume that most, if not all, of the our

[188] "Subjective and Objective" in *MQ*, pp. 198-199 and Chapter XI of *VFN*.
[189] *VFN*, p. 112.
[190] "The Absurd" in *MQ*, pp. 11-23 and *VFN*, pp. 214-223.
[191] "Death" in *MQ*, pp. 1-10 and Chapter XI of *VFN*.
[192] "The Fragmentation of Value" in *MQ*, pp. 128-141 and Chapter VIII of *VFN*.
[193] Nagel has written a number of articles on the nature of ethical problems, see especially Chapter IX and X of *VFN* and Chapter 6 of *LW*.
[194] See especially his *Equality and Partiality*.

features (meaning of life, values, freedom, concern about our death, skepticism toward our own attitudes and beliefs, etc.) are, if they are *real* at all, essentially related to the particularity of our viewpoints to different degrees, we can only obtain different conflicting views about them. Therefore, no unified conception of reality is likely to be achieved and the intemperate appetite for such a conception generates all those unacceptable theory of the world and ourselves.

4.3 The Significance of Nagel's Reformulation

In the last section, I have explained the nature of the subjective-objective conflict and why Nagel considers it to be the deepest common source of philosophical problems. If Nagel is correct, all traditional philosophical problems should be reformulated in terms of this conflict. They are *mortal questions*: questions *of* and *for* us, concerning the nature of reflective beings and arise only because of our reflective nature. The significance of this reformulation is threefold. Firstly, it spells out and explains the real nature of traditional philosophical problems. Secondly, it legitimizes these problems as still worth investigating in such a so-called "post-philosophical" era. Finally, it provides a new direction for approaching these problems.

First of all, Nagel's reformation serves an *explanatory function*. In trying to capture the real sense of our various philosophical perplexities by his unique and original reformulation of traditional philosophical problems, Nagel provides a better explanation to the source and nature of these problems. He

[195] Chapter V of *VFN*.

argues convincingly how the problems arise and why they remain unanswered. According to Nagel, philosophical problems arise because of our reflective nature, which give rise to the conflicts between a subjective and a relatively objective viewpoint. The past theories fail to solve these problems because they are not sensitive enough to such a conflict and misidentify the real source of the problems. They do not even have the right questions to answer and so they are always committed to either of the extremes implicitly.

Utilitarianism for example, represents an Pan-objectivist moral attitude toward what we should do. Taking the objective view as the real picture, it deliberately ignores or even suppresses anything personal and subjective. I think most philosophers would have the following feeling. Although utilitarianism has its own irresolvable problems, and can neither account for all moral phenomena satisfactorily nor provide comprehensive guidelines for our action, somehow we (or even a Kantian) have to admit the importance of the overall utility produced by a action. Such acknowledgement seems to be intuitive, in that we all think it is *certainly* the case, an obvious fact that need no further reason to support. However, Nagel's reformulation can provide a good explanation to our dissatisfaction of and yet strong commitment to the utilitarian doctrine. According to Nagel, ethical problems arise because, regarding the question of what we should do, we can view our concerns, motives and interests from both a more subjective and personal and a relatively more objective and impersonal points of view. The conflicts between my interest and that of the others are primarily internal ones, conflicts *within* the individual:

> The impersonal standpoint in each of us produces...a powerful demand for universal impartiality and equality, while the personal standpoint gives rise to individualistic motives and requirements which present obstacles to the pursuit and realization of such ideals. The recognition that this is true of everyone then presents the impersonal standpoint with further questions about what is required to treat such persons with equal regard, and this in turn presents the individual with further conflict.[196]

The aim of our ethical deliberation is then to work out some ways to reconcile

[196] *E&Q*, p. 4.

the conflicting viewpoints without suppressing either of them to an unreasonable extent. Now, the utilitarian maximization of overall utility has such a strong claim on us because it expresses a demand from our impersonal viewpoint. It is grounded upon our reflective nature. The impersonal viewpoint, however, is only one part of our selves. The demand from our personal viewpoint – concerns developed from and essentially related to our particularity – resists being swallowed up by the impersonal one and so rejects utilitarianism as *the* comprehensive ethical theory. Personal interests and desires should also be taken into account in ethical deliberation as some kind of ends we should pursue instead of a mere means of achieving overall happiness. Besides impersonal demands, personal or subjective demands are also ethical in nature. This explains why it is so difficult for us to endorse utilitarianism wholeheartedly, especially in the cases where the promotion of general interests demands tremendous sacrifice of ones' personal interest. Accordingly, we can see the explanatory power of Nagel's reformulation[197].

Besides, the Nagelian reformulation serves a *legitimizing function*. Given it does provide a better explanation of the nature of philosophical problems, what we are now concerned about is the question whether such problems are real problems worth studying. In a word, what is the point of philosophizing? How can our pursuit of philosophy as something significant be legitimized? A convincing answer, I believe, can also be provided by Nagel's reformulation. We have already shown that, according to Nagel:

① The capability of transcending one's view to a more objective level and form more detached view is the fundamental feature of all reflective beings; and

② All traditional philosophical problems have their common source of perplexities in the conflict between a more internal, subjective and a more detached, external and objective viewpoint of the same reflective being.

[197] Similarly, the popularity of all implausible forms of reductionism in the philosophy of mind ("What Does It Like To Be A Bat"), determinism and agent-causation theory regarding the problem of free will ("Subjective and Objective" and Chapter VII of *VFN*), standard argument for absurdity ("The

① and ② together show that philosophy is inescapable for us, in the sense that once we are aware of our reflective nature, we cannot avoid these problems and they are thus worth our effort.

It may be asked that even if all reflective beings are capable of viewing and do view the same world and themselves from both a subjective and a relatively more objective point of view, *and* the source of perplexity of all traditional philosophical problems does lie in the conflicting views derived from these two viewpoints of the same reflective being, it *at most* follows that philosophy is inescapable to all reflective beings. However, there are not many reflective people, so why should we be worried about the problems, if there are any, of the reflective minority, namely intellectuals, or only the philosophers?

It is true that philosophical problems are problems only for reflective beings. It does not mean, however, that they are problems only for some highly reflective human beings. It is true that philosophers directly engage in formulating, explaining and attempting to provide solutions for philosophical problems, but it is not true that they are dealing with problems only for them. The question raised above misconceives what a reflective being is. In defining "reflective being", I do not say that it is what *in fact* reflects upon its viewpoint and view, but what is *capable* of doing so. It is true that not every (in fact *no*) human being engages in reflection every single minute, but at least most of them (except infants or some serious mentally handicapped) are *capable* of doing so, and do reflect occasionally. Once they have been conscious of their view and viewpoint, engaged in such reflection, they are never the same as before.

Finally, Nagel provides a new direction and an approach for us to deal with philosophical problems. Since philosophical problems are generated by the subjective-objective conflict, the ultimate goal of philosophical thinking should be the reconciliation of the two viewpoints. This is achieved by examining the existing theories of different philosophical problems, pointing out why they fail to recognize, address and reconcile the conflict adequately and advancing better alternatives for them. The procedure depends much on

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Absurd"), and scientism and idealism in metaphysics can be illuminated by Nagel's reformulation.

the use of intuition, which shows us some fundamental and undeniable facts, In turn, they, as we have mentioned, provide a simple test for the credibility of any theory about what there is and what we should do. Since they are undeniable, theories fail to acknowledge these facts are necessarily wrong and a new hypothesis should be advanced. The approach can be briefly stated as follows. A theory **T** of the reality of an object **O** is acceptable only if it succeeds in taking everything real about **O** into account. If a specific theory **Ta** fails to accomplish this, it should be rejected. It amounts to saying that **Ta** should be rejected if it can be showed that there is more to reality than what **Ta** can accommodate, and that in accepting **Ta**, we will inevitably leave part of reality of **O** behind. In arguing against existing philosophical theories, Nagel first shows that it is an intuitive fact that an object **O** (e.g. in the case of mind-body problem, the subjective character of experience), which is excluded from reality by **Ta** (physicalism), is real. Then, he refutes all the anti-realist arguments which claim that **O** is *just* appearance and cannot be real by showing that these theories are only the products of certain unjustified assumptions (what is real can be explained exhaustively by scientific method). Finally, he provides a reinterpretation of the reality of **O Tb** (the dual aspect theory) that can accommodate **O** as part of reality[198].

In defending the distinction between subjective and objective, Nagel seems to be doing something out-dated, already-proved-to-be-pointless, contrary to what is taken for granted in contemporary philosophy. It is generally thought that some traditional ways of categorization and some dichotomies once believed to be very important — noumenal-phenomenal, rational-irrational, reality-appearance, objective-subjective, fact-value — are now obsolete, useless, cause more trouble than they worth, and we had better abandon them altogether. Among them, what has been attacked most is precisely the dichotomy between subjective and objective[199], and it seems

[198] His employment of this strategy is the most explicit in his treatment of mental reality and value. Regarding free will, he explains why all existing theories fail to address the problem without providing any candidate.

[199] See, for example, Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton

to be a commonsensical belief in philosophy that no one should adhere to such a dichotomy anymore. In reformulating traditional philosophical problems as the conflict between the subjective and the objective viewpoint, Nagel seems to be doing something that there is no longer any point to do. This fact to some extent explains why Nagel gives us the impression that he is traditional, boring, ignorant and irresponsive to the contemporary — pragmatist, post-modern, whatever — challenge to traditional notions in philosophy, and hence why he is, I believe, underestimated. Nevertheless, my view is that though Nagel does employ some old terms and support all the dichotomies mentioned above in formulating and explaining old problems, he is in fact a *reactionary* thinker. He is reactionary in that his project of reformulation aims at giving new and original re-interpretation to most of the traditional terms used in philosophical discussion — intuition, subjectivity, objectivity, reality, epistemology and ethics. In doing so, he deliberately argues against those contemporary challenges to the legitimacy of philosophy by showing that there are still many possibilities that have not been and hence should be explored. In a word, Nagel is reactionary to the contemporary philosophical laziness or childishness, which are driven by the "rebellion against the philosophical impulse itself":

> It is like the hatred of childhood and results in a vain effort to grow up too early, before one has gone through the essential formative confusions and exaggerated hopes that have to be experienced on the way to understanding anything. Philosophy is the childhood of the intellect, and a culture that tries to skip it will never grow up.[200]

Here, we can see the basic conflict between Nagel and those who promote, in one way or another, the end of philosophy. While philosophers like Rorty tells us that philosophy is dead because there is nothing more for philosophy to say or do, Nagel shows that philosophy is only in its infancy; we do not even have the proper formulations for our problems, not to mention the appropriate solutions. While the former complains that there is nothing more

University Press, 1979); Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

[200] *VFN*, p. 12.

to do, the latter argues that there is still a lot of work to do, and the former do not see it only because they turn their back against it; they are clouded with self-deception driven by philosophical laziness.

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CONCLUSION:
THE ULTIMATE MYSTERY

In the above chapters, I hope I have accomplished what I set out to do, namely to access the contribution of Nagel. I have argued that Nagel succeeds in capturing the intuitive sense of traditional philosophical problems through reformulating them in terms of the conflict between the subjective and the objective viewpoint, and hence shows that they are all grounded on fundamental facts of human beings. This injects a new life into and reestablishes the legitimate status of philosophy in this so-called post-philosophical era. As a conclusion, I am going to discuss what Nagel regards as the ultimate mystery in philosophy – the very fact that we are reflective beings at all.

As we have mentioned, Nagel regards philosophical problems, which are revealed to us in an intuitive sense of puzzlement, as originated from our ability to view the world and ourselves from both the subjective and the objective viewpoint. These problems are rooted deeply in our reflective nature. We have an impulse for truth, which drives us to reflect upon our beliefs about and attitude toward what there is and what we should do. During the process of reflection, we discover that some of our beliefs are groundless, irrational and false due to our particularity, and so we strive to get rid of these distortion by forming more and more objective views. Problems

arise when we try to understand the *subjective* features of reflective beings with the same method of *objective* detachment. On the one hand, what is subjective can only be understood exhaustively with subjective means, but a conception we know to be subjective does not guarantee what it represents is real. On the other hand, what is real must be metaphysically objective in the sense that its existence does not consist in its being viewed and so it must be acknowledged from an objective viewpoint. As a result, regarding features like mind, knowledge, freedom, value, ethics and meaning of life, which are so fundamental to us as reflective beings, we cannot justify a unified view in the subjective-objective spectrum. While we have to acknowledge their existence, we cannot form any unified and comprehensive conception about them, and it is precisely this indeterminacy that renders such features so mysterious. We know that we are conscious and free and that our life has meaning, but we do not know exactly what it is and how it is possible to be conscious or free or to have a meaningful life.

Such mysterious feeling is overwhelming when our reflection turns back to the very capability of reflection itself. It is an unrevisable intuitive belief that we have the capability of reflection, since its denial presupposes such capability. What is this capability? As we have seen, we are capable of reflection only if we have the capability of objective detachment, i.e. the capability to detach from the previous viewpoint and transcend to a more objective one. This, however, is not yet sufficient. To reflect, we must also be able to *evaluate* our view and viewpoint, and *distinguish* what is valid from what is generated out of bias and prejudice. This, according to Nagel, is accomplished by our *rationality*, "the capacity to recognize objectively valid reasons and arguments"[201]. This is a faculty which we cannot but employ in all our reflection. Whenever we evaluate a particular belief or conception, we always tries to find out what is really the case, and we always rely on our rationality in doing so. The authority and hence our reliance of rationality, whether on the issue of what to believe or what to do, is intuitively undeniable. Given we are just the contingent products of evolution, it seems astonishing that we are capable of thinking rationally and knowing the reality at all. Is it

[201] *LW*, p. 138.

really the case that we have such capability? How is it possible that something that appears to us as rationally undeniable is real in itself? Furthermore, we always discover that what we take to be rational are in fact the outcomes of something irrational. Isn't it, then, possible that there is in fact no such thing as rationality at all?

All the above questions clearly arise from our reflection about our own rationality. From an objective viewpoint, we human beings are just one particular kind of thing in the world. All our capabilities are the joint products of our contingent and specific physical, physiological, psychological, social, cultural and historical conditions. Besides, the substantial contents of these factors can be tremendously different among different human beings. All these together seem to render the existence of rationality, whose claim is not just local but objective and universal, in such limited beings like us, highly incredible. However, subjectively, as reflective beings, we cannot have the least doubt about its existence. To deny the existence of rationality is equal to denying that we are reflective beings, which is impossible. The problem, as Nagel formulates, is how it is possible that "creatures like ourselves, supplied with the contingent capacities of a biological species whose very existence appears to be radically accidental, should have access to universally valid methods of objective thought."[202] This sense of bafflement is expressed in what Nagel calls "subjectivism" of rationality in the contemporary philosophical discussion, which is a skepticism about the objectivity of rationality, claiming that:

> The relativistic qualifier – "for me" or "for us" – has become almost a reflex, and with some vaguely philosophical support, it is often generalized into an interpretation of most deep disagreements of belief or method as due to different frames of reference, forms of thought or practice, or forms of life, between which there is no objective way of judging but only a contest for power. ...Since all justifications come to an end with what the people who accept them find acceptable and not in need of further justification, no conclusion, it is thought, can claim validity beyond the community whose acceptance validates it.[203]

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[202] *LW*, p. 4.
[203] *LW*, pp. 4-5.

It takes the form of various attempts of providing a *naturalistic explanation* of the existence of rationality in the contemporary philosophy. Here, "natural" is in contrast with neither "supernatural" nor "social-cultural" but "normative". An explanation of rationality is natural if it tries to give a non-normative account of the normativity of rationality. Despite the variety among them, many contemporary philosophers[204] have tried to explain the somewhat amazing existence of rationality as a natural phenomenon, a product of the natural process of human development which can be accounted for by specifying the circumstances – biological, psychological, sociological, economic or political - of its emergency. The general tendency is to "collapse its content into its ground, so that it doesn't reach as far beyond us as it appears to do."[205]

If a naturalistic explanation of rationality is true in the sense that it accounts for the nature of rationality exhaustively, the only conclusion seems to be that rationality itself is subjective and relative to what give rise to it. The general form of the argument can be formulated as follows:

① We are the products of evolution.[206]

② Rationality as a distinctive feature of us is generated and shaped by some natural (and cultural) facts throughout the long evolutionary process.

③ Rationality, along with our biological and psychological constitution and our cultural beliefs, is simply a natural fact about us.

Therefore,

④ Our rationality reflects only what is particular about our own evolutionary history and has no universal authority at all.

In a word, our reflective nature drives us to reflect upon our rationality and as a result, we find that rationality is a natural and contingent fact about us. The natural consequence seems, then, to be a skepticism of the fruits of our

[204] "More recently, versions of it are found in W. V. Quine, Nelson Goodman, Hilary Putnam, Bernard Williams, and Richard Rorty," *LW*, p. 7.
[205] *LW*, p. 7.
[206] Here, "evolution" is taken in a broad sense, referring to not only the biological but also the social and cultural development of human beings.

reasoning, especially science, ethic, and ultimately, philosophy, the very reflection about our reflective nature. In the end, the only truth seems to be relativism.

The problem with the above argument, as Nagel points out, is that even if a naturalistic account, whether appealing to biological, psychological, economic political or cultural facts, succeeds in explaining *causally* how rationality emerges, it *alone* says nothing about its normativity. In other words, ④ does not follow from ① - ③. That something arises naturally does not entail that it cannot be also of a normative nature. It would be the case only if we assume that what is real must be accountable naturalistically. While the Pan-subjectivist odour of such assumption renders it highly implausible (see 3.3), the normativity of rationality, as we have mentioned, is something we cannot deny. Indeed the recognition of this fact is the *precondition* of our acceptance of any such naturalistic explanation of rationality. If the naturalistic explanation, which renders the objectivity and universality of rationality questionable, were true, it would undermine itself because our acceptance of it is grounded exactly on our rationality.

All the above amounts to saying that our rationality, with its essentially normative character, cannot be accounted for naturalistically without ceasing to be what it is. We still do not understand why we are rational and capable of getting to know about parts of the world in which we are merely tiny specks. What alternatives are left? One popular and influential explanation of this idea of "a natural sympathy between the deepest truths of nature and the deepest layers of the human mind"[207] is a religious one: that is the design of a God. Nagel, however, rejects it on the ground that its apparent explanatory power is illusive:

> Here, as elsewhere, the idea of God serves as a placeholder for an explanation where something seems to demand explanation and none is available; that is why so many people welcome Darwinist imperialism. But there is really no reason to assume that the only alternative to an evolutionary explanation of everything is a religious one.[208]

[207] *LW*, p. 130.
[208] Ibid., p. 133.

The appeal to God in explaining the possibility of our rationality in fact explains nothing unless we can specify clearly the nature of God, which have never been successfully accomplished. We simply do not have a clear and coherent idea of God, and so such a practice is simply to explain what is obscure by something even more obscure. What is more important, however, is to realize that such an irrational reliance on God has a common root with all the reductionist and deflationary philosophical theories. They are all different expressions of our intemperate craving for explanation for anything we encounter. When we fail to give any plausible account for something, we tend either to deny its reality or to project some kind of entity which *is simply defined* as the placeholder of an explanation. Both of these reactions is derived from the assumption that what is real is accountable by us, which we have already shown to be unjustified.

So apart from subjectivism, reductionism, evolutionism and God, what is left for us? Nagel believes that the most plausible attitude we should adopt is to admit that the possibility of rationality cannot be explained:

> In fact, the objective capacity is a complete mystery. While it obviously exists and we can use it, there is no credible explanation of it in terms of anything more basic, and so long as we don't understand it, its results will remain under a cloud.[209]

Perhaps there can be no unified and comprehensive explanation of our rationality, and hence of the world as a whole. The possibility of rationality presents us with the ultimate mystery that shows us the limit of our understanding. We simply have it, think with it and rely on it, but cannot explain and justify its objectivity and universality non-circularly. It, however, does not imply that we should abandon rationality as our tool of reflection. If rationality is something inescapable, and in many occasions fruitful, we should employ it as far as possible, with the recognition that what we have established may be proved to be wrong in the future. It seems to be the fate of all reflective beings like us.

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[209] *VFN*, p. 78.

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